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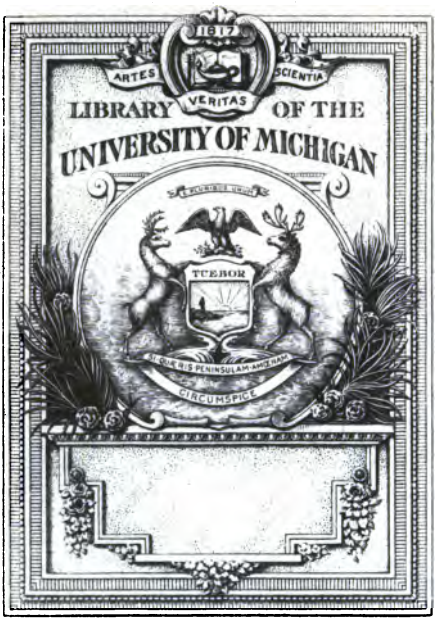

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WHAT IS CATHOLICISM?

What is Catholicism?

BY

EDMOND SCHERER

TRANSLATED BY THE

REV. THOMAS ALEXANDER SEED

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY THE

REV. R. F. HORTON, M.A., D.D.

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INTRODUCTION

THE startling passage of arms between Prof. Mivart and Cardinal Vaughan, the ex-communication of the man of science by the Cardinal, and the triumph of the Cardinal in consigning the body of his antagonist to an unconsecrated and Godless grave, have raised again in England a question which had for some years slumbered.

Catholicism, it is true, had never pretended to be tolerant, but Protestants in their charity had ascribed to it a virtue which it could not affect, and it had allowed the soft impeachment in the interests of a conversion on which it was set.

Suddenly the inexorable hand of fact drew aside the veil and scattered illusion. It became evident that the Roman Church was

what she was in the days of Galileo—shorn of the power, and that the sacred deposit of human liberty could only be secured by shattering the claims of a Church which was its irreconcilable foe.

When Father Clarke came forward with the Theory of Catholicism, and claimed that the subsequent developments of dogma had been contained in the deposit which Christ handed to His Apostles, that Christ instructed Peter in the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin and in the Infallibility of the Pope, as well as in the doctrine of Transubstantiation and the system of Penance, immediately the educated world realised the fact that it was still face to face with the old Obscurantism, and that before the demands of the Church the truth of science and the truth of history, and with these the truth of morals and the truth of life, must inevitably go down.

Such a reminder and such a shock will give a singular interest to M. Scherer's letters, which, originally provoked by the promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate

Conception, are equally relevant to every fresh assertion of the Roman Authority.

M. Scherer was a master of that luminous style which seems to find its only fitting expression in French. He had many of the qualities of Pascal, and his letters stand in the legitimate succession of the *Letters to a Provincial.* If he had not Pascal's incomparable irony, he had in compensation a firmer and clearer grasp of positive truth, and the more extensive and philosophical view of religious problems which has only become possible in this century.

Never was the case of the truth-seeker stated against Roman claims with more temper, with more candour, or with more convincing logic. The conversation with which the letters are completed, between the writer and his hitherto silent correspondent, clinches the argument, and shows that there is and can be no answer:

"The Catholic believes by proxy. In this system faith is a blank cheque, which the faithful hands to the Church to fill up. It is

the faith of the charcoal-burner—'I believe what my curé believes.' 'And what does he believe?' 'Oh, he believes what the Church believes.'"

There is the whole situation in a nutshell. But why should men be ready to hand over this blank cheque to the Church? It is the human infirmity that wishes to have religion without being religious, to compound with God, and yet not to yield to God, to be rid of religious responsibility by committing it to the loudest claimant. There is "a need which most men feel of renouncing all spiritual individuality, all personal piety, in order to allow themselves to be taught, directed, and sanctified by the priest."

The future of Catholicism is therefore assured. "Catholicism is at once perishable, like everything that is of man; eternal, like everything that is of humanity." Its future is assured; it will be the religion of the nations and the persons that, regardless or despairing of truth, have renounced progress. It will attract and retain decadents.

But the strength, the faith, the devotion of man will pass away from it. Nations which are to prosper will decisively shake off its yoke, communities that demand the higher morality will repudiate the casuistry of its confessionals and the sordid enervation which is produced by having confessionals at all; individuals that regard truth as all-important, that have any faith, or are capable of having any faith, in a living God, or that can contemplate with clear vision the original documents and the eternal first principles of Christianity, will increasingly, year by year, without heat or passion, but with a will that turns not back, reject the system, which, as M. Scherer shows, is not Christianity, but a growth, a parasitic growth, which has intertwined itself with that imperishable plant that is yet to overshadow all nations.

ROBERT F. HORTON.

FIRST LETTER

AUTHORITY IN CATHOLICISM

MONSIEUR LE CURÉ—I have not the honour of your acquaintance, and feel that I ought to apologise for my boldness in writing to you. For a long time I hesitated. At length my need of enlightenment on some grave questions has triumphed over my reluctance. I am assured, moreover, that you fulfil the functions of your ministry with much zeal, and that you regard it as one of your chief duties to guide the souls in search of truth. This assurance has entirely overcome my scruples.

I will not hide from you, Monsieur, that I was not born in your communion. To what shade of Protestantism I belong will not

much matter to you, nor need I say more than that I am a Protestant in the sense that all Christians who are not Catholics are Protestants.

I hasten to add that I do not share the feelings of many Protestants with regard to Catholicism. I have a horror of that pitiful and insulting polemic to which the advocates of both Churches too often give themselves, but which seems to me more out of place in the mouth of the adversaries than in that of the defenders of Rome. One of the privileges of the Protestant is to hold a position which allows him to recognise the good and the true wherever he meets with them, and to be able to acknowledge the services that your Church has rendered to religion and civilisation. Catholicism has a right, if it can, to bring all things under the absolute rule of its own faith, though, to my thinking, this is its weakness and misfortune; but for the Protestant to act in this manner, as if he imagined he alone possessed the truth, and all the truth, and as if the Roman Church were

to him the personification of error and of evil, this seems to me a deplorable inconsistency.

Kindly, therefore, do not range me among those who consider Catholicism as the child of hell, Rome as the scarlet woman of the Apocalypse, and the Pope as the Man of Sin referred to by St. Paul. So far from that, Catholicism appears to me to be one of the religious phenomena the most worthy of attention. I contemplate the history of its formation, of its developments, of its conflicts with the greatest interest. I can conceive the fascination it is capable of exercising on the imagination, and even on the intellect. I recognise how profound are the roots it strikes into the minds of the masses. I believe that many of its saints and doctors, of its religious orders and of its pontiffs have deserved well of humanity. I can never bring myself to despise or to hate the Church of St. Bernard and St. Louis, of Pascal and Fénelon. Nay more. When I see sincere souls pass from our ranks into yours, I am neither scandalised nor astonished beyond

measure. How should I blame them for seeking among you the rest and help they need?

Such being my disposition, you will not be surprised to learn that, some time since, I resolved to study Catholicism with renewed attention. . . . Unhappily, no sooner did I begin my studies than I was stopped short by an unexpected difficulty. In vain did I read many authors, in vain did I consult my friends; I could not find the information I needed. At this point I was advised to apply to you. As the curé of my parish, I was assured that you could not refuse to help me. I therefore come to you in my embarrassment, and am confident that you will not disappoint the expectations of one who may be wrong, but who ventures to believe himself sincere.

Wishing to proceed as methodically as possible in my researches, I asked myself first what was the teaching authority in the Roman Church. You will easily understand why I began at that point. Before going

farther it was absolutely necessary that I should ascertain where I might find an authentic exposition of the doctrines of Catholicism. Besides, I had always heard infallibility spoken of as the special privilege, the essential characteristic of your Church, and it seemed to me of paramount importance to discover the seat of this supernatural virtue. Infallibility once established, would not all other questions be decided, all other difficulties overcome?

I soon found that the question was not so simple as might have been supposed. Seeing with what assurance Catholics speak of infallibility, I imagined I had only to ask the first I met to ascertain the depository of that infallibility. So far from that, the more questions I asked the greater was the variety of answers I received.

The Church was infallible. This might mean that all the faithful enjoyed the privilege of not being mistaken in matters of faith. But no such pretension has ever been put forward; besides, in the Catholic sense, the

Church is not so much the faithful as the clergy.

Then does infallibility pertain to the clergy? One might think so. Considering with what plenary renunciation the faithful give themselves up intellectually and morally into the hands of a director of conscience, it often occurred to me that the infallibility of the director could alone justify that conduct. For how can I submit my mind without reserve to the teachings of the priest, and my conduct to his injunctions, unless I am sure that the priest represents the Church as the Church itself represents Jesus Christ, unless God speaks to me through the mouth of this priest—in a word, unless this priest is infallible? It is also clear to me that in the practice of piety, the faithful regards his confessor as infallible, and that Catholicism is inconsistent in not claiming this privilege for the whole of the clergy. However, this has not been done, and it was not for me to cavil about it, but to look in other directions for the source of certitude.

I thought of the bishop of the diocese. There also I saw the exercise of an authority that appeared inexplicable or exorbitant if it did not rest on a divine inspiration. It is true that there also I found the absence of all personal pretension to such a privilege. Still, the idea of the episcopate had put me on the track, and I believed myself to be approaching the oracle at last. I was aware of the considerable part that had been played in the history of the Church by great assemblies of bishops convoked from all parts of Christendom to decide questions of faith or discipline. These were called œcumenical councils. That of Nicea settled the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity; that of Chalcedon established the manner in which the two natures are united in Christ; that of Trent condemned most of the Protestant heresies. From this I concluded that the Catholic Church is represented by its bishops in council, that, therefore, the councils are the depositories and the organs of infallibility, and that, consequently, you must address yourself to the

councils if you would obtain the Catholic teaching in its most reliable form. Alas! I soon discovered that I was again mistaken.

As a matter of fact, I had many questions to propose that the councils have never dreamt of answering. It would therefore have been necessary to convoke a council for my special benefit, and however zealous the bishops of the Catholic Church might be for the salvation of souls, I could hardly venture to believe that they would all meet together in order to enlighten me. Councils may be infallible tribunals, but it must be admitted that they are not of much use to Christendom, seeing that they only meet at intervals of centuries, and that the faithful can neither address to them his inquiries nor make known to them his uncertainties. Besides, who does not see that councils henceforth are a superfluous wheel in a machine which works perfectly without them? Rome now decrees dogmas without convoking them. The Immaculate Conception has killed the universal synod.

There remained the Pope. At this name my hopes revived. The Pope, in the theory of modern Catholicism, has become so thoroughly the synonym for infallibility, the Church is regarded as so completely centralised in the person of the sovereign pontiff, the doctrine which tends to raise the authority of the See of Rome ever higher has made so much progress in men's minds that everything invited me to seek in Pius IX. the help I so much needed. I verily believe I should have gone to him had I not shrunk from a journey to Rome, and the expense and loss of time involved. When it is a question of obtaining an infallible decision in matters of faith, however, one ought not to stand on terms. To possess the truth, to know the way of salvation—I ought to be ready to go to Pekin, if needs be, to enrich myself with such a treasure.

I was on the point of booking my seat in the diligence when a remnant of prudence induced me to look into things a little more closely. Excuse me, sir, but I wish to inform

you quite ingenuously as to the reflections which shook my confidence in his Holiness.

All that a pope says and does is not inspired, of course, since there have been among the popes not only profligates, but even heretics. It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish between the decisions of the Pope in his individual capacity and those that he takes in virtue of his official character. Now, in order to make this distinction, we must know where the private character ends, and where the sacerdotal character of the sovereign pontiff begins; we must know when the Pope may be considered as speaking as the vicar of Christ. That is precisely what has never been determined.

So that if it is difficult to consult œcumenical councils, it is no less difficult to know when the Pope is pope. But this is not all. As if to crown the difficulty, it might seem that popes and councils had set up rival claims to infallibility, and that the poor private member of the Church were obliged to adjust their respective rights before he can know where

Catholic authority resides. There is no point upon which the doctors are more divided. Some of them put the councils above the Pope, others put the Pope above the councils, while still others pretend that infallibility is to be found in councils presided over and approved by the Pope. In the absence of councils, the same question arises with respect to the relations between the holy father and the college of cardinals. Abyss of uncertainty! And I had so fondly imagined that Romish infallibility was going to render all things certain!

A last question led me to see to what an extent I had been deceived. If we were to admit that the seat of infallibility had been clearly determined and universally recognised, should we be any farther advanced? In no wise. Suppose all Catholics agree to place supreme authority in the Pope, are we at the end of our discussions? By no means. In fact, I cannot prevent myself asking on what this opinion is based, and, since it is the Bishop of Rome that is in question, what

titles, what proofs this pontiff has to offer in support of his supernatural privileges. To this question they will give me one of two answers: they will either say that the authority of the sovereign pontiff rests on the assertions of the sovereign pontiff himself, or that it rests on something else. But if it is the Pope who calls himself infallible, we are in what is called a vicious circle, for we should need to be sure that the Pope is infallible before we could be sure that he was not mistaken in calling himself infallible. If, on the other hand, papal infallibility rests on some other authority than that of the popes, it does not rest on an infallible authority, since it is in the popes alone that infallibility resides, and we fall into the region of the uncertain at the very moment when we have most need of certainty.

This is perhaps enough for a first letter. I am not at the end of the difficulties raised in my mind by my study of Catholicism, and I shall count upon coming to you again for light.

SECOND LETTER

AUTHORITY IN CATHOLICISM (*contniued*)

MONSIEUR LE CURÉ—I have described to you what I may call my first pilgrimage in search of infallible authority. My success was not great, but I am not yet going to be beaten. I shall not lightly give up that authority incarnate, that always accessible oracle that the Catholics imagine they possess. I loved to think of the Holy Spirit as dwelling in the Christian society and expressing Himself, when necessary, through an official organ. I had often heard the advantages of this present, speaking, acting infallibility opposed to the inconveniences of a dead letter like the Bible of the Protestants. Alas! the loveliest of dreams is but a dream. Mine had vanished. It became necessary

to inquire whether the Catholics, in default of a vicar of Christ, possessed a written authority. I started out courageously upon this new campaign. You will see with what success.

I did not spend much time in searching for Catholic authority in the works of the great theologians of your Church, Bellarmine, Bossuet, Möhler, Wiseman. These theologians are not always in agreement with each other, and I could not undertake the task of harmonising them. Besides, the more I read these eloquent and specious expositions, the more sensible I became of the distance there is between the ideal Catholicism of the doctors, and real Catholicism such as is believed and practised by the multitude. Nor is this all. The theologians in question are highly esteemed; their books are constantly recommended to heretics; but these books lack the sanction necessary to make them authoritative. We are not authorised to regard the conceptions of a Bossuet or a Möhler as the official expression of the

Catholic faith. They are personal views which may be more or less well-founded, but which the Church has never adopted. Suppose a Protestant, charmed by these beautiful pictures, should abandon Geneva for Rome: presently he finds that the reality corresponds but ill to the image they have drawn of it; he complains; he blames the Bishop of Meaux; he rails at the author of the *Symbolik*. "You have only yourself to blame," his confessor might reply; "the doctors you name were able men, no doubt, but you should know that their works have never been declared infallible."

The same objection cannot apply to Holy Scripture since, for Catholics as for Protestants, Holy Scripture is the Word of God. At all events one might suppose that the Bible is the authority common to the two rival communions, and that the only difference between them is a difference in the interpretation of the sacred text. Catholics frequently appeal to the words of the Lord and of the Apostles. They constantly cite as final argu-

ment such passages as "Thou art Peter, and on this rock will I build My Church." Yet it did not need much reflection to convince me that the Bible cannot be the supreme authority of Catholicism. You would be the first, Monsieur, I am certain of it, if I were to say that I was going to seek the Christian truth in the inspired volume, you would be the first to remind me that Scripture is not above the Church, because it was the Church that collected, sanctioned, and conserved the sacred books; you would be specially careful to warn me that the interpretation of Scripture is regulated by the Church, that the meaning consecrated by tradition is the only true meaning, and that no one has the right to depart from it. Now, if tradition determines which are the sacred books, and in what way they are to be understood, it is evident that the authority of tradition is superior to that of Scripture. Such was my reasoning, and thereupon I set myself to work to examine whether tradition did not constitute that infallible and final

authority, to the search for which I had already devoted so much time and toil.

Tradition is teaching which, emanating from Jesus Christ, from the Apostles, or from some other organ of the Holy Ghost, has been transmitted from mouth to mouth through the centuries. Not that tradition has never been written, but that it was not written by those from whose lips it originally proceeded. Some traditions have been recorded, others not; and here again began my embarrassment.

For unwritten tradition to become authoritative it must be known, and in order to know it one must be able to distinguish it from that which is not tradition. It is true, they offer me a touchstone by which I may infallibly discern it. "That which has been taught everywhere, always, and by all," that, they say, is the true tradition. And the means of knowing what has been taught everywhere, always, and by all? No answer.

Happily, I am not the man to fling the haft after the axe. Unwritten tradition

escaped me; I made up my mind to be content with that which at various times had been fixed in writing. Where was it to be found? I put the question to an ecclesiastic of my acquaintance. "You must be very ignorant," he answered; "all you have to do is to read the Fathers, the Popes, and the Councils."

"All right," cried I, and away I ran to a bookseller's to buy the Fathers, Bulls, and Canons. I declared that I must have the best editions, and that price was no object. The man stared at me with eyes wide open, hunted about among his shelves, and finally ranged in three rows the most formidable collection of big books that I had ever seen in my life. "These are what Monsieur requires," he said to me at last: "the Library of the Fathers, printed at Lyons, in 28 volumes, folio; the Papal Bulls, edition de Cocquelines, also in 28 volumes, folio; lastly, the collection of Councils, edition de Mansi, in 31 volumes, folio." "Is *that* all?" I replied; and I came away without another

word, but not, I must confess, without a little bitterness of heart.

For, think of my predicament. Here I was, seeking for the supreme and infallible authority in the Church of Rome, and authority is the Romish Church itself, for everything, in that Church, returns to the question of authority, since infallibility is its privilege, its essence, its *raison d'être.* Let me add that if authority is the essence of the Church, the Church, in the Romish system, is the essence of Catholicism. So that, Monsieur, in seeing the seat of authority flying from me, I was seeing the Church dissolve, and Catholicism itself. I had asked myself: "Where does authority reside?" I now asked: "What is the Church? What is the Catholic religion?" I found no answer to either question, and I am obliged to beg of you to-day to tell me what is your religion.

What is your religion? You will pardon me, I hope, Monsieur le Curé, but there are moments when I am tempted to think that Catholicism is nothing but a vast system of

subterfuges, by means of which all these questions are evaded. You seek the truth, and you are sent from the Scriptures to the Fathers, from the Fathers to the Councils, from the Councils to the Popes; you are bandied about between rival pretensions and diverse theories, and you come out of it all with the conviction that, at bottom, in the Romish Church, it is not a question of believing, but of believing that you believe and holding your peace.

In fact, Protestants are much to be pitied. Catholics exhort us to submit, but without telling us to what authority we must submit. They invite us to enter into the bosom of the Church, but without determining in what that Church consists. They enjoin us to believe, but without being able to tell us simply what we are to believe.

I end, Monsieur, with a final appeal to your charity and loyalty. What is Catholicism? An answer, please.

THIRD LETTER

THE PROOFS OF CATHOLICISM

MONSIEUR LE CURÉ—I have frankly told you the result of my first researches on Catholicism. I said to myself: Catholicism is the Church, and the Church is authority, and I set myself to find out what was the seat of that infallible authority which is the essence of Catholicism. I was not able to discover it. I then asked myself involuntarily whether Tradition, Church, Authority, all these big words, were not, after all, mere words, empty abstractions, or, at most, an ideal to which nothing corresponds in the reality. Still, I managed to stifle this doubt, a doubt that would have made further research superfluous. I wrote to you, I told you my difficulties, and while awaiting your

reply I pursued my studies as if nothing had happened.

What is Catholicism? Such was the first question I proposed to myself. What are the proofs of Catholicism, what are the marks of its truth, what are the titles it puts forward as the basis of its claims? Such was my second question. You must admit, Monsieur, that I could not have proceeded more methodically.

The new question seemed to be more difficult to answer than the previous one. The problem as to the seat of authority had been raised by the rival pretensions of the popes, patriarchs, and councils, and if it was not solved, at least it had been clearly formulated. But I found nothing similar to this in regard to the proofs of Catholic doctrine. It was necessary to listen to preachers, to consult theologians, to run through a thousand controversial works; it was necessary to lay aside secondary arguments, to classify those that seemed to be solid, to set in opposition those that seemed to be contradictory. The

task was not a light one. Nevertheless I set about it with ardour—alas! with more ardour than success.

Between you and me, Monsieur, there must be no dissimulation. I am quite aware that I cannot relate to you my successive discomfitures without running the risk of hurting your feelings as a Catholic. Is that a reason why I should be silent? Do you cease to sit in the confessional because many of the confessions you hear may possibly soil the purity of your soul? I trow not. I will therefore tell you at once and without circumlocution that the proofs usually alleged in favour of Catholicism appeared to me to be illusory. I will enumerate these proofs that I gathered here and there, and point out where they failed to satisfy me. It is for you, Monsieur, to say whether I have omitted any essential consideration, whether I have not clearly understood others, and, lastly, whether I have been inaccurate or unjust in my estimate of them.

I was preparing to enter on this solemn

quest when a prejudicial question flashed across my mind. "I am about to ask Catholicism to furnish its proofs," said I to myself; "but does Catholicism need any proofs? May it not claim to be self-evident, and may not self-evidence take in it the place of demonstrations?"

I do not know whether the defenders of the Romish Church have ever explicitly affirmed that the pretensions of that Church bear this stamp, but I am certain that the whole theory of Catholicism implies that assertion. Catholicism, in the eyes of a Catholic, is not only absolute truth, it is also absolute certainty. It is of the nature of a first principle. It is axiomatic. It has no need to discuss, but simply to affirm. It justifies itself to the mind, as the light to the eye, by penetrating it. Only prejudice or dishonesty can fail to discern the divinity of it. Catholicism is certain; nay more, it is the very source of certitude, and all that seems most certain in the world, all truth, all principle, all belief, all right, all duty, have no

other foundation and no other guarantee than the teaching of the Church Infallible.

These, Monsieur, are the consequences at which those numerous theologians necessarily arrive who at present emulate each other in undermining the whole natural order in order to leave nothing standing but the Church, and who are endeavouring to make of universal doubt the basis of infallible authority.

Besides, how explain or justify the intolerance of the Romish Church save on the ground of its self-evidence? Tolerance rests on the principle of the uncertainty (*l'inévidence*) of religious beliefs; but the moment a dogma is certain for all, it may, and therefore ought to be, received by all; incredulity becomes the most culpable of stupidities, and chastisements present themselves as a means of opening the eyes of the heretic as legitimate as it is efficacious.

And yet, Monsieur, what a paradox is this! Catholicism self-evident! What is there in it, I beg of you, that bears this character? The infallibility of the Church,

doubtless, since infallibility is the supreme expression of Catholicism.

What! the infallibility of a man or of a number of men who resemble me in everything else, and who are not always, it may be, either sages or saints! That is what must be received as an axiom. I am bound to admit as a primary and self-evident principle that these individuals may be mistaken as men and as individuals, but that they become the mouthpiece of God when they are met together in a certain number, and when they speak with certain forms. It would be truer to say that it is with infallibility as it is with transubstantiation. I see a piece of bread which has the look, the substance, the taste of bread, but which, in spite of my senses and of appearances, I must hold to be flesh and blood. And so I see a person of ordinary understanding, of contemptible character, whom I hear talk nonsense, whom I see commit iniquities, and yet I must admit that the Holy Spirit has chosen him as organ. The characteristic of other miracles is to

reveal, but this conceals; in truth, it might be said that, in order the better to dissimulate itself, infallibility is pleased to put on the appearance of error and falsehood. And that, forsooth, is the dogma that they would make the foundation of all human certitude. It is a reversal of the very principle of certitude. Instead of believing on evidence it would be believing against evidence. Admit, then, that we have the right to demand from you the most conclusive proofs before renouncing the ordinary certitude for your Catholic certitude.

It was these conclusive proofs that I desired to collect. At the same time, before I proceeded, I wished to ascertain whether, in default of evidence, it would not be possible to call in a supernatural illumination as a sufficient reason for the Catholic faith. At first I was seduced by the simplicity of this apologetic instrument. I saw in it an excellent means of repelling all objections. And yet, Monsieur, I venture to think that you will approve of my rejecting such an

argument. Who does not know that all religions pretend, or may pretend, to a demonstration of that kind; so that if there had been no other way of reaching conviction in matters of faith, we should have been obliged to give up comparing the respective claims of Catholicism, Protestantism, Mohammedanism, Buddhism, etc. In other words, all we should have had to do would have been to sit down and patiently and passively wait for the beam from on high. Not that I question the necessity of grace to determine the adhesion of the heart to the convictions of the intellect; God alone can produce the sacred affections, without which men are never really won to the Gospel; but it is also certain that men do not become Christian without knowing what they should believe, and why they should believe it. It is with illumination as it is with Providence; he who should see everywhere only the direct action of God would fall into fatalism; he who should leave everything to inward grace would fall into illuminism.

The Catholic Church, I may add, runs no risk of falling into any such error. She knows that illuminism justifies the most divergent beliefs, for everybody may call or believe himself illuminated; she knows that to refer everything to supernatural grace is to put the individual into the place of the Church, to break the Catholic unity, to set up a sort of Protestantism. Moreover, this pretended method would lead straight to absolute predestination. If it is God that enlightens, if it is necessary to be enlightened in order to believe, and if it is necessary to believe in order to be saved, then it is evident that God is the cause of the unbelief and of the perdition of those who do not believe. Now, the Catholic Church discards the doctrine which makes God the cause of evil. There is no need to prove that illuminism has no place in Catholic tradition. Your Church has never renounced discussion with unbelievers. Your doctors have written innumerable volumes to convince Jews and Mussulmans, Atheists and Protestants,

infidels and heretics. Your councils have reasoned at length and at large. Your preachers have marshalled their syllogisms. Your Lacordaires and Ravignans and Combalots have filled their conferences with arguments of all sorts and suited to all tastes. Would not all this be grossly inconsistent if conviction depended on grace alone? Assuredly; and if the Romish Church distrusts reason, she will not substitute for it the methods of mysticism.

Once sure on this point, I did not hesitate any longer to look for rational demonstrations, and I very soon came across one that appeared to me to be exceedingly specious. "God," say the theologians of whom I am about to speak, "God has set up in the world an infallible sign whereby we may discern the truth; He has opened a reliable source of certitude; it is universal consent. The general reason of the human race is evidently superior to the reason of the individual; in fact, it contains all that there is in common in particular reasons; con-

sequently, it is the knowing faculty raised to its highest power, it is the true human reason. Catholicism, therefore, is true because it is catholic, that is to say universal." At bottom, you see, Monsieur, the rule of consent is simply the famous maxim of Vincent of Lerins: orthodox doctrine is "*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est.*"

Strictly speaking, I might have dispensed with examining an argument that Lamennais has tainted with the renown of heterodoxy. Still, I did not think I ought on that account to pass it by. I thought if Lamennais is suspected, St. Vincent is still in good repute. Then it seemed to me that the doctrine of the illustrious Abbé has real and deep roots in the soil of Catholicism, and that deference to general consent is usually the way in which men become Catholics. There are many minds which only walk safely when they are supported by the multitude.

But if the Pope had condemned in M. de Lamennais a catholic tradition, passably

authentic, I was not long in reaching the conviction that, at bottom, he had condemned a doctrine that is not very solid. It is a fact that individual reason sometimes gives an immovable certitude, and it is not the fact that universal consent always gives that certitude. Have there not been universal errors, such as astrology and sorcery? Have not all truths begun by being rejected and outraged? Will it be said that it was less obligatory to believe in Christianity when it was represented by a mere handful of confessors and martyrs? Would you admit that the certitude of Catholicism has diminished since the Reformation carried away half its adherents? As for myself, my instincts are so little Catholic on this point that I must confess I am led to distrust an opinion when it is adopted by the majority; to me it is a bad sign when an idea is adopted with enthusiasm by the multitude; and I should find it very hard to believe that justice, with the strength of soul which it presupposes, and truth, with its infinite *nuances*, are

the privilege of what are called "the masses."

Up to this point I had met with hardly anything but shifts and subterfuges. Not one of all the arguments I had examined had offered a real handle for discussion. I had more joy, when at length I reached the ground of history. My joy, it is true, was not unmixed. I almost trembled to think that it was a last attempt, and that if historical evidence failed me I should have to renounce all hope of discovering the proofs of Catholicism.

Permit me, Monsieur le Curé, to share with you my reflections; I am anxious that you should judge for yourself as to the conclusions to which I have been led.

Catholicism professes to rest on a positive institution of Jesus Christ. This institution is a fact which must be established like any other fact, that is to say by historical testimony. But this testimony, it need hardly be said, must be estimated according to the rules of criticism. We will therefore inquire to

what writings the words of the Lord have been consigned which refer to the foundation of the Church. We will ascertain the date of those writings. We will examine whether they were really produced by the authors whose name they bear. We will inquire whether they were well informed, whether they heard the words themselves or received them by tradition, and, in this case, whether the words have not been altered. This being done, we will begin the study of the passages whose authenticity we have endeavoured to establish. I need not add that we will study them in the original, availing ourselves of all the helps supplied by grammars and lexicons. But this is not all. The meaning of the passages in question has been obscured by numberless discussions, and it will be prudent to compare the various interpretations that have been given from the Fathers to our own day.

What an undertaking! And even this would avail us nothing if we could not give ourselves up to the work with that composure

demanded by studies so arduous. But no. I sit down at my desk, I open my books, I turn over my dictionaries, I am just about to begin when all at once, oh horror! I see the sword of Damocles above my head. Nay, worse than that. Damocles was terrified by a sword attached to a thread; I tremble beneath a sentence of eternal damnation, hanging on the much more delicate thread of the researches upon which I am entering. Should I have the misfortune to overlook a witness—I am lost! Should I mistake the value of an expression—my place will be among the damned! My mind, limited or confused, if it should miss the meaning of a passage—I shall be cast into the outer darkness as a heretic or schismatic!

Perhaps you will try to shorten and facilitate the task by sending me for certitude from the texts to the inspiration of the Bible, and for the interpretation of the texts to Catholic tradition. But Monsieur, the most elementary logic will show you that you have no right to do so. In your eyes, it is the

authority of the Church which establishes the inspiration of Scripture, and, consequently, if Scripture is to serve you in proving the authority of the Church, this cannot be as an inspired book, but simply as an historic witness. It is the same with Tradition. From your point of view, it can only have value, or at all events authority, after we have demonstrated the authority of that Church which teaches the infallibility of Tradition.

Catholicism has nothing to expect, M. le Curé, from proofs drawn from history. It is impossible that it should ever consent to leave the question of its claims and the cause of its authority to the hazards of learned and difficult researches, at the end of which doubt is often encountered and seldom that full certainty with which the Romish Church can never dispense.

What, moreover, shall we do with the simple, the ignorant, with artisans and labourers whom we cannot surely abandon to unbelief, and from whom we cannot expect

historical studies. This objection seems to me decisive. Cardinal Wiseman, who is himself a learned man, very clearly understands this. And so, the Catholic faith, according to him, is a grace which God vouchsafes to infants in baptism. Very well. That is an argument that cannot be answered. It is equally true that it cannot be proved, and that we are obliged to receive the assertion on the prelate's word.

In short, Monsieur, you theologians have many proofs to offer me, no doubt, but proofs which either are no proofs or are not accessible to the ordinary run of mortals. And so my embarrassment has simply increased since I last wrote to you. The other day I did not know what to believe; to-day I do not know why I should believe. But it is impossible that Rome should not have foreseen such a difficulty, that it should not have some good answer in reserve, and I need not add that I look to you, Monsieur, for that answer.

Permit me to say that all the resources of your science will not be too much for this purpose. You would feel this yourself if you knew what I hear all round me, and how difficult I find it sometimes to answer what is said. This is what happened to me this morning. I was seated in my study, engaged in the researches of which I have spoken, when in came one of my friends. He is a man of sound judgment and impartial intellect. I had often heard him defend Catholicism against narrow Protestant prejudices, and also, I must admit, rail against the Romish Church, its political intrigues, its stubborn superstitions, the ignorance of its priests, and the tone of its journalists. I had concluded, very simply perhaps, that he was a man without prejudice. However that may be, he enters, he approaches, he asks me what I am studying. I tell him frankly, with the secret hope that he will help me to find my way. But no: "Mere waste of time," said he. "The labour to which you have set yourself shows that you do not

understand the nature of the subject. The strength of Catholicism is simply a strength of fact. The Romish Church is in possession and, at bottom, it needs no other titles. Men discuss its rights, it exercises them. To those who demand reasons it responds by its existence. Its pretensions appear to you excessive, but it is these very pretensions that are the secret of its power. A man who talks loud and holds his head high may excite the contempt of well-bred people, but he makes his way in the world nevertheless; he is imposing and he imposes himself upon it. Catholicism has built on the most solid of foundations, to wit the imbecility of the masses. There are exceedingly few men in the world who reflect: most men are like sheep; they feed where they are pastured. A religion, for such men, has no need of proofs. Proofs! the Romish Church has none, it can have none, it could not do with any. What is a proof in matters of faith but something moral which goes to the conscience, which arouses, enlightens, and binds it? What is

it but the conquering ray that penetrates into the depths of the soul, the sovereign balm that soothes the agitations and that heals the wounds of the heart? What is it but a manifestation of the spiritual power of the truth? And how can you expect that Catholicism, which is merely an ecclesiastical society, a hierarchical organisation, should be susceptible of such proofs? But I go further. To demand proofs of Catholicism is to demand an inconsistency, it is to ask it to commit suicide. To furnish proofs is to take the human mind for arbiter. Now, the fundamental dogma of Rome is the incompetence of the human mind. This is why each step towards Rome carries you farther away from it. In testing its assertions you are practising free examination; consequently you are placing yourself outside the conditions of the faith to which you would attain. It is sometimes said, I know, that there is a use of reason which ends in the abdication of reason, that there is a use of free examination which conducts you to the threshold of

the temple and then retires to give place to submission. It is an illusion. Men do not become catholic by the protestant method. When a man has once learnt to inquire and to examine for himself he is in danger of continuing to do it all his days. I do not believe in that renunciation of the intellect which, after it has settled the principal questions, no longer troubles itself about details. You wish to enter the Roman Church? Then lay aside your books, your researches. Silence your reason. Abandon all examination and discussion. Shut your eyes and throw yourself into the maternal arms. Run to a director of consciences, place in his hands your intellect, your conscience, your whole personality. Plunge into the practices of religion. Pascal found no other remedy for the doubts that Catholicism had raised in his mind: you will find no other way of escape from the difficulties that free examination has multiplied around you."

Such were the words of my friend. I

will not hide from you the fact that they have made some impression upon my mind. I feel confident, however, that you will be able to remove it by showing that stultification is not the royal road of Christianity.

FOURTH LETTER

THE PROOFS OF CATHOLICISM (*continued*)

M. LE CURÉ—If you do not relish all my reasonings, I am sure you will admire my perseverance. While I await your answer, I continue my researches, discussing questions as they arise, and looking at Catholicism on every side. With so much zeal, it will be a pity, will it not, if I do not reach a satisfactory conclusion.

In my last I stated the objections that appeared to me to be raised by the various arguments adduced in proof of Catholicism. Nevertheless I did not believe that these general considerations dispensed me from the duty of entering into the details of those proofs. This is why, without dwelling upon the manifest impossibility of the faithful

weighing historical evidence, I set myself to pass in review the arguments borrowed from history by the Roman Church. These are drawn in the first place from certain passages in the New Testament. Chief of these are certain words of Jesus in which Catholicism thinks it finds its fundamental charter. Among these sayings there are two to which your theologians attach a special importance. The first relates to the founding of the infallible Church; the second to the supremacy of the Pope. Let us see whether this is the meaning of these texts.

According to St. Matthew's Gospel, the Lord when about to depart from His disciples addressed these words to them: "All power is given unto me," etc. (Matt. xxviii. 18-20). Let us see by what comments Catholic interpretation makes the Roman Church with its infallibility, its clergy, etc., spring fully armed from this passage.

"Go, teach all nations." By these words the Lord institutes a class of men whom

He constitutes the sole depositories of His Gospel, and on whom He confers the authority to teach and govern in all parts of the world. Here, therefore, we have the founding of the priesthood and especially of the episcopate.

"I am with you unto the end of the world." These words, continues Catholic exegesis, promise to the apostles and their successors a special grace without which they would not be able to fulfil their mission. Now, by this grace must necessarily be understood the privilege of never being mistaken. Here then is the foundation of infallibility.

Do not say, M. le Curé, that I am drawing a caricature. I purposely avoid filling these pages with references and quotations, but I am ready to name my authors if you desire it. I assure you that I have consulted the most respected and accredited. But let us pass on to the second passage.

In that same Gospel we read that Peter, having declared his belief in Jesus as the

Messiah and the Son of God, the Lord addressed him in these words: "I say unto thee that thou art Peter, and on this rock will I build my Church," etc. (Matt. xvi. 18, 19).

This time the traditional commentary takes the form of a syllogism: the Lord made Peter the foundation of His Church; now subsequently Peter became bishop of Rome; therefore the popes are the heads of the Catholic Church. What more evident!

Before going further, permit me, Sir, to draw your attention to the truth of what was said in my last letter as to the nature of historical proofs. The reasoning by which the popes are put in the place of St. Peter rests entirely on the supposition that St. Peter was at one time Bishop of Rome. There comes a Protestant who shakes his head and says: "It is not absolutely certain that Peter ever was at Rome, and it is beyond all doubt that he never was Bishop of Rome. None of the ancient writers of the Church had any knowledge of any such

episcopate. The first who refer to it are Optatus of Mileve and St. Jerome, and they lived in the second half of the fourth century. That is to say, for the first 300 years there is no reference to this dignity of the prince of the apostles. Moreover, it is easy to prove from the New Testament that the episcopate, in the Catholic and consecrated sense of the word, is entirely foreign to apostolic ideas! How would you reply to this, Monsieur? By arguments? But will those arguments be powerful enough to exclude all doubt? By anathema? What! a point in archæology and history to become an article of faith?

But let us lay aside critical discussions. Perhaps you do not feel any more at your ease among them than I do. Convictions are seldom either produced or destroyed by processes of this kind. Moreover, the gravest objections raised in my mind by the Catholic interpretation of the passages under consideration are objections of an entirely general character.

Here is the first. The Lord says, "Go, teach all nations." You see in that the founding of the priesthood. He says, "I am with you." There you see a promise of infallibility. Again He says: "I will build my church." Instantly there rises before your mind the image of a great religious association, with a regular organisation, with priests, bishops, popes, with sacramental and judicial power; in a word, the Roman Church as it now is. That is to say, in order to interpret these passages you begin by putting into them that which you desire to draw out of them. It seems to me, however, that a perfectly unbiassed man who knew nothing of Catholicism would find it very difficult to discover that religious system in the verses quoted. He would rather think, and that quite naturally, of a Church founded on a free profession of Christian truth; of a sacred obligation laid on all to spread the Gospel according to their opportunities; and lastly, of that divine help, promised to all, which frees the soul from error by cleansing it from sin.

This leads me to another objection. In your eyes, not only does Christianity depend on the Church, but the Church is *par excellence* the object of the Christian revelation, and Jesus Christ came primarily to found that Church as the repository of truth, the channel of grace, the sole means of salvation. Outside the Roman Church you do not admit the possibility of faith, you do not conceive of any Gospel. This shows how important the notion of the Church is in the Catholic system. Everything springs from and returns to it. Accordingly one expects to find the Church occupying a place in the teaching of the Lord and His apostles proportionate to the position it occupies, according to you, in the Christian economy. If Christ willed the Catholic Church, if He actually founded it, He will no doubt have expressed His intention in various places. At all events He will have stated His intention in exact and express terms. He will have shown that it was to be a society, as Bellarmine puts it, as visible and palpable as the kingdom of

France or the Republic of Venice. He will have distinguished the clergy from the laity; He will have indicated that the apostles must have successors, and that these successors must be bishops; He will have defined the mysterious virtue of ordination; He will have pointed out the grades of the hierarchy; He will have provided for unity; He will have proclaimed what is the seat of infallibility. You know, Sir, with what care and in what detail the Law of Moses occupied itself with the Israelitish priesthood, with its functions, and its rites. Nothing minuter than these ordinances. Some of them actually regulate the sacred vestments. With how much greater reason will not the New Testament have been explicit with respect to the institution of the new priesthood! How copious and exact it will be in describing the link between the Christian and Jewish priest! How clearly it will proceed to determine the respective attributes of the Pope, the bishops, and the councils! How it will insist on the duty of the faithful to attach himself to his

bishop! How it will make us admire the unity and the universality of the ecclesiastical organisation! The conditions of existence of Christianity are at stake, the conditions of salvation of the individual soul—this will of necessity be clear, categorical, evident.

Once more, my dear Sir, this is not a satire, nor is it my fault if it reads like one. Am I too hard to please? In presence of a Church that asserts the divinity of its origin, the infallibility of its decrees, the eternal perdition of those who do not belong to it, have I not the right, is it not my duty, to demand on what these pretensions rest—pretensions of which it may be said that they are monstrous if not well founded? It seems to me that if the Catholic theory be true, the New Testament ought to be full of the Roman Church. I am too exacting? Very well then, I will be content with one single passage, with half a passage, provided it be positive. Instead of this, what am I offered? Three or four verses in which the Roman system is not found except by means of

subtlety and violence. According to your theologians, Jesus must have purposely spoken in enigmas. Instead of clearly stating His will with respect to a matter of such extreme importance, He must have done His utmost to conceal His will. He must have studiously sought how to speak so as not to be understood. For, once more, Sir, who will pretend that the meaning attached by your Church to the passages in question is self-evident? And what would you think of a human legislator who had laid down his laws in that way? What would you think of a political constitution based on a charter so equivocal?

Catholicism lacks a Biblical basis, and it should cease to seek in the New Testament titles which become illusory by reason of their insufficiency. But this is not all, and I beg you to give me a little more of your attention.

Protestants reject many rites and doctrines solely for the reason that they are neither commanded nor taught in Scripture. "You have no right to act thus," say the Catholics.

"You start from the principle that Scripture is the only rule in matters of religion, whereas that is the very point in question." There is some force in this. But if, as a general thesis, the silence of Scripture is not a sufficient reason for rejecting a doctrine, if the exclusive character of the authority of the Bible ought at least to be established beforehand, still you will admit that the teaching of the Catholic Church ought not to be opposed to Scripture, that is to the teaching of the Lord and His apostles. Well, now, it is at this point I ask you to pause. Catholicism, both in its letter and in its spirit, appears to me to be in contradiction with the New Testament. You painfully seek out texts to justify such and such an article of faith, to support a second, to give colour to a third. I beg of you to leave these trifles. Let us try to place ourselves on a higher level. Let us consider the evangelical dispensation in its general character, in its incontestable spirit, in its manifest tendencies.

What do we find? Jesus Christ came to

fulfil the Law, that is to say to extract its eternal essence. Dropping all that was ritual and temporary, He founded a Kingdom of God into which each one enters on the sole condition of humility, repentance, holy desires, charity. St. Paul, in perfect harmony with the thought and teaching of the Master, condemned legalism, literalism, rites; he showed that all these things were shadows of the things of which the Gospel is the reality; he reprimanded those who abandoned the spirit to return to the observances that belong to the flesh; he preached a religion in which there is no room for a priesthood; he spent his life in combating Judaism. Now, Catholicism is simply a revival of Judaism; it is a Christianised Judaism. It is the régime of the Law substituted for the régime of grace; it is the external rule substituted for spiritual liberty. Catholicism has an importance of its own. Like Judaism it is a preparation for the Gospel—I mean a pure and real Gospel—; but, like Judaism, it becomes an enemy to the Gospel when it forgets its

inferior and preparatory rôle. It is the religion of those who are incapable of any other. It disciplines crude and ignorant peoples. It will no doubt long be the spiritual tutor of the masses and the refuge of weak souls. I am ready to do it this and every justice. I only ask one thing—that no one claim for the Roman Church divine institution and apostolic character. You have only to open the New Testament to see the absurdity of such pretensions.

I should not like to finish this letter, M. le Curé, without offering you a reflection, not connected with what I have said, but which will bring us back to our starting-point.

Catholicism, I think I may affirm, cannot produce any proofs properly so called. Yet it exercises an undeniable power over men's minds. What is the secret of that power? A difficult question, and one of the most interesting that a thinker can propose to himself! I have often reflected upon it, and, if you will allow me, I will give you my ideas on the subject.

If Catholicism cannot act by way of demonstration, there remains to it the way of moral pressure. For it, the problem is to determine the will without addressing itself to the reason, and it must be admitted that it has solved this problem with remarkable success. Like me, you have often heard its defenders allege that outside Catholicism there is nothing but uncertainty, unbelief, and corruption. "Rome alone," say they, "gives men the repose they crave. Free examination, on the contrary, gives birth to doubt. Moreover, Protestantism is self-destructive. One sees its sectaries falling successively from the doctrines of the Reformation into Socinianism, from Socinianism into Deism, from Deism into Pantheism, from Pantheism into Socialism." To these arguments *ad terrorem* are added other well-known considerations: "God cannot have refused to men certitude in matters of faith; He cannot have abandoned the world to the embarrassment of religious research; He cannot have given His revelation without at

the same time giving a sure means of knowing it. This means is the Catholic Church. One, universal, palpable, everybody knows where to find it. Immutable, it always teaches the same things. Infallible, it excludes doubt as well as terror. Everywhere else man finds himself on the shifting sands of relative and, consequently, uncertain truths, while there he finds himself on the solid ground of absolute and absolutely certain truth."

These arguments, as I hinted above, are not proofs destined to convince, but considerations advanced to push souls into the arms of the Church. It cannot be denied that these considerations respond to a very general need, the need of certitude, or rather the need of quietude, in religious matters. We wish to see religion with our eyes, to touch it with our hands, to enclose it in our formulas. Its moral excellence is not a sufficient proof to us of its truth. We demand that it shall make itself clear by external and material signs. Why is this? Is it not because if it were more spiritual

religion would only have certitude for the religious soul? Is it not because where the inward demonstration of the spirit is wanting it is necessary to replace that demonstration by the outward certitude of the senses? But I am here touching on a delicate subject that I do not wish to treat to-day.

However this may be, the strength of Catholicism resides in the evidence with which it surrounds or pretends to surround Christianity. The boldness with which it claims the character of absolute truth attracts minds craving for certitude. On the one hand men find a priesthood that professes to be sure of its business, on the other they see the field open to research, to doubt, to change. The choice with many men will not be difficult. They will conclude that Catholicism is in the right because it offers most security. As to the basis of that security, that cannot be questioned without falling again into that labour from which they wish to escape at any cost. Besides, you know the proverb: "One does not look a gift-horse in the mouth."

Roman apologetics reduce themselves to this, that God must have given us His revelation in a precise, finished, immutable form, in the Catholic form, in short. One might contest the right of these apologists to determine how God has been obliged to act, and to confine the divine liberty within the conceptions of their intellects. But it is safer to compare these conceptions with the facts. Let us look into this matter for a moment.

I run through the history of the divine dispensations, and nowhere do I find that characteristic which they contend is the mark of the true religion. God does not reveal Himself in an imperious manner. He does not impose on men's minds an immutable doctrine. He has not a ready-made religion for all times and places. He has slowly and variously prepared mankind for revelation. Instead of arresting the nations suddenly in their ways, He has guided and disciplined them. He has made of error and even of heathenism a means of education. From another side, in the Law of Moses,

He has shown that even a divine revelation may be but temporary. But if the religious history of mankind before Christ was but a spiritual education destined to prepare men's hearts for Him who was to come, why should you refuse to consider all subsequent history as a new education destined to advance men in the knowledge and fellowship of Him who has come? From this point of view, as I have admitted, Catholicism has played a considerable part in the accomplishment of the divine plan. It may be said of it that it has abased itself that we might be exalted. Its unfaithfulness to the pure Christian spirit, its relapses into Judaism, its opposition to the teaching of the New Testament, have perhaps been inevitable, and even to a certain point favourable to the evangelisation of the world. Still, even under this régime, appropriate to the time of its spiritual minority, Christianity gradually became capable of a greater independence. The day arrived when the child, now become a man, broke away from the leading strings that had guided

its first steps. Such is the meaning of the movement in the sixteenth century. But the Reformation was not the last word of Christianity. The God who revealed Himself to us in the Gospel has doubtless many revelations yet to make to us of the meaning, the hidden riches, the endless applications of the word of life.

It certainly seems as if the idea that God must have established some means by which all uncertainty, all hesitation, all research, and consequently all progress in religious matters should be excluded, imposed itself upon the human mind. Yes, on the mind devoid of culture; and this is why the idea has such a power over the masses. Ignorance readily believes in absolute truth, but education and experience teach us to see gradations where we found contrasts, simple differences where everything appeared to be opposed. The man who in his youth passed very decided judgments on men and things, changes his tone when age has rubbed off the angles of his thought.

Let us make an experiment. Try to lay aside for a moment your preconceived ideas as to the form which a revelation must assume, and suppose things happened in some such way as this. God gave His Son to the world in order that He might teach, live, and suffer, and that believing in Him we might have eternal life. He went about doing good, He healed the sick, scattered the seed of His word, died, shedding His blood for truth and righteousness, for the salvation of men and for the cause of God. Trusting to the intrinsic virtue of His teaching, He did not write it down; He was content to write His word in human hearts. Knowing that living truth is not formulated in Bulls and Canons, He was careful not to establish an infallible tribunal, and He abandoned the truth to its own inherent energy. . . . He put the seed into the ground and left it to germinate. . . . He foresaw that His Gospel would at first be too deep for some, too simple for others; that all the powers of sin, of pride, of ignorance,

of stupidity, would band themselves together to obscure its splendour; He foresaw all this, and yet He did not doubt its ultimate success and triumph. He bequeathed to the ages the realisation of His work. It was His will that men should gradually appropriate and assimilate His religion, and that Christianity should thus become more and more spiritual. In a word, into the destinies of His Church He admitted the law of development—Suppose all this, and then tell me what there is in it unworthy of Jesus Christ. Does the theory of Catholicism seem to you to be more conformed to the justice and goodness of God?

But I am forgetting myself. Please remember that you owe me many answers. I shall be obliged to go on asking questions: my embarrassment increases day by day.

FIFTH LETTER

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

M. LE CURÉ—In my first two letters I showed you how I had sought in vain to discover the seat of infallible authority. I had afterwards to admit that I had not been more successful in discovering the proofs on which the pretensions of the Roman Church are founded. A religion whose proofs, a Church whose foundation eludes examination, is not an easy subject to study. But, as you have seen, I am not easily discouraged. I resolved to make another effort to find out what Catholicism is. This time, however, I took a different course. Since the Roman Church has adherents, said I, let us see what they are; let us examine how their beliefs differ from those of other men, in default of

Catholicism, let us see what a Catholic is. This will come to the same thing. Do not all roads lead to Rome?

There are three things that constitute a Catholic. In other words, your Church attaches salvation to three conditions. These are orthodox belief, participation in the sacraments, obedience to the discipline and government of the Church. Faith, it is clear, dominates the other conditions, since it is the condition of them; one only obeys the Church and participates in its sacraments because he believes in the sacraments and in the authority of the Church.

In what consists the faith of the Catholic? Evidently that faith embraces the whole Catholic teaching—that is to say, not only the truths of the catechism, but all Scripture, all tradition, all the decrees of the councils; and what is more, it embraces all these things in the sense in which the Church understands them. On the other hand, there are very few men in a position to study, and consequently to receive intelligently, a body of

doctrine so considerable. This is why they have invented a distinction between explicit and implicit faith. According to this distinction, which is also to be found in St. Thomas Aquinas, there are some things which the faithful are bound to receive with knowledge, and others which they are bound to receive simply on the assurance of the Church.

What are the things that must be believed explicitly? Some divines demand, as a minimum, the Apostles' Creed. But the fact that they insist upon this creed proves that the Church does not insist upon it, for the theologian would not need to speak if the Church had already decided. Moreover, it is not the Creed that makes the Catholic; the Creed contains the least, and the least characteristic, part of Catholicism. Protestants, for example, have always admitted and recited this Confession of Faith, and yet in your eyes they are none the less outside the communion of the faithful.

The Catholic Church has never required of its children more than one article of faith

—faith in itself. And indeed this article contains all the others, but it contains them implicitly. In the Roman system, faith is itself essentially an implicit faith. Some may believe more, others less; it matters little so long as they are agreed upon the fundamental dogma of the infallibility of the Church.

It seems useless to prove an assertion which simply expresses the essential character of Catholicism. Ask your own teachers in what they place the superiority of their religion to Protestantism. They will answer that only Catholicism is within reach of all; it demands of the sinner nothing but to throw himself into the arms of the Church, and by the extreme simplicity of this condition it makes itself accessible to the simplest and most ignorant.

And there is another thing, M. le Curé, that I should like you to note. Even if a Catholic should know all the Christian dogmas, his faith would still rest upon the Church. Why does he receive those dogmas? Not because he has examined them, tested

and approved them, not because of any excellence he has recognised in them, but because the Church imposes them upon him. Now, is it not obvious that to believe in this way is not to believe in the dogmas so much as to believe in the Church? Beneath the articles of the Creed, is it not the Church the faithful sees? is it not in it that he finds rest? is it not to it he renders homage?

Would you like a final proof of my assertion with respect to the character of Catholic belief? It has become the fashion with those of your writers who pique themselves most on their orthodoxy to submit their opinions and their writings to the judgment of the Holy See. They may err on subjects the most important, on dogmas the most essential; they may be Tritheists or Sabellians, Monophysites or Nestorians, Pantheists or Socialists, but they subscribe to the decision of the Church, whatever that decision may be; that suffices to purify their faith; they remain good and true Catholics. I know nothing more significant.

To sum up, the Roman Church may have a body of Christian doctrine, and it has one, but that doctrine is simply an outwork. This is so true that the distinguishing characteristics of Catholic dogmatics hold less and less place in the teaching and polemics of your co-religionaries. Obeying profound tendencies, Catholicism has ended by concentrating and, as it were, absorbing itself in its principle—the infallible authority of the Church. The consequence is that the Catholic Faith has been reduced to a single article, the belief in that authority, and the duty of submitting to it. For a Catholic, to believe is to admit whatever the Church has decided or shall decide; to admit it blindfold, and without even knowing what the decisions are. The Catholic believes by proxy. In this system faith is a blank cheque, which the faithful hands to the Church to fill up. It is the faith of the charcoal-burner—"I believe what my curé believes." "And what does he believe?" "Oh, he believes what the Church believes."

The nature of Catholic belief is the secret of that unity which the Church regards as one of its most striking privileges.

Men are so constituted, either from natural individuality or as a consequence of sin, that they never agree in large numbers except on a very few points. Multiply the articles which must serve as a basis of an association, and you proportionately diminish the number of members. This is specially true of a religious association, because the religious convictions in which you wish men to unite are generally more absolute, and consequently more exclusive than others. Not belonging to themselves, but being considered as the expression of divine truth, they do not admit of the compromises which play so great a part in the various spheres of civil society. Moreover, a detailed confession of faith repels many more believers than it attracts. The first condition of existence for a Church which has regard to numbers only is the simplification of its symbols. This the Catholic Church has marvellously understood.

The bond which unites its members is the simplest possible. It consists in a single article, and a very general one—submission to the Church.

I have said that this bond is simple; I ought rather to have said that it is artificial, and that the unity it forms is more illusory than elementary. In fact, as we have seen, this bond is not faith, but want of faith; I mean the absence of all personal, conscious, tested belief. The Catholic Church is an assemblage of men who are agreed on the choice of an agent, and who remit to this common agent the care of their spiritual interests. This being done, each goes his way. Now, I ask you, is it not a mockery to dignify this purely negative accord with the name of unity? Is it very wonderful that men should dispute little about matters with which they do not concern themselves?

The error of Catholicism on this, as on so many other points, arises from the idea it forms of the Church. The Church should not be an end but a means, and yet Catholicism

has come to regard the Church as the very end of religion, the Alpha and Omega of Christianity. It is the same with unity. Unity is not an end. The true aim of a Christian society is the development of the religious life of its members. Where that life exists unity is produced spontaneously. Catholicism has willed unity for its own sake. Hence it has sought to establish it by artificial means, and thus it has reached a unity without reality. The true unity is the communion of souls, a communion which supposes life, liberty, individuality; and which, on the other hand, does not exclude considerable differences of sentiment and conduct. By setting itself to strip its members of all that constitutes the life of the soul and human personality, Catholicism has mistaken the conditions of spiritual union. It has preferred uniformity to unity. Instead of building an edifice solid enough to resist the tempest and to house free men, it has built a house of cards and filled it with puppets.

There was a time, M. le Curé, when the

whole of European society was obedient to Catholic law. A new theocracy had been established. Orthodoxy had become the basis of public right. Crusades exterminated the heretics whom interdicts did not subdue. Europe allowed itself to be fashioned after the image of the Church. Why did this period end? Why did the world break loose from the Church? Why that struggle between Rome and the peoples, in which the peoples were enfranchised? Why that secularisation of society which forms the unmistakable characteristic of modern times? Why, except that Catholicism was for Europe a form rather than a principle of life, a body rather than a soul.

While I am speaking of Catholic unity, I take the liberty to submit to you a thought that has often occurred to me.

The Roman Church boasts of its unity as of a privilege peculiar to itself. That is something I could never understand. In what does religious unity consist? In the homogeneity of belief among the members

of a Church, and consequently in the exclusion of those who do not share the official belief. But are not all Churches alike in this respect? Are they not all agreed in receiving those who accept their articles of faith and rejecting those who do not? In what then does the unity of the Catholic Church differ from the unity of other Churches? I can see no difference between the Churches except the difference in numbers, and numbers do not make unity.

The pretensions of Catholicism to the advantages of unity rest probably on the ridiculous notion Catholic writers form of Protestantism. You take this word in a sense analogous to the word Catholicism. You mean by Protestantism not the religious insurrection of the sixteenth century, not the principle of free examination, but a definite religious communion, all whose members are *solidaire* with one another. Then, as there are many different Churches known under the common name of Protestant, you reach the idea of a Church divided into many

Churches, of a religious communion whose adherents differ considerably among themselves, and sometimes fight and curse each other. It is time, sir, to get rid of a phantom raised by ignorance or bad faith. The term Protestantism, taken to designate the Protestant Churches in the aggregate, is simply an abstraction. Each Protestant Church is a whole in itself. It does not differ from the Catholic Church in that respect, unless it be that its homogeneity is more real. It has just as much right as Rome to regard itself as the centre of the Christian system, and to consider other Churches, the Roman Church included, as errant and rebellious sects.

I am mistaken. Without thinking, I have touched upon a true distinction. Protestants recognise as Christian every Church in which the Gospel is professed; they agree in proclaiming that men may be saved in all the Churches; they do not even except the Church of Rome. This, on the contrary, does not recognise Church, Christianity, or salvation except in the Catholic system. It

is in this sense that the Roman Church is *one*, or at least that it professes the principle of unity; the other Churches admit many churches; as for it, it admits but one. Exclusiveness, that is the distinguishing characteristic of Catholicism, the word that best sums up its complex being. It remains to be seen whether this characteristic is a source of strength or of ruin, a title of honour or of condemnation.

SIXTH LETTER

THE CATHOLIC SACRAMENTS

M. LE CURÉ—The more I think of it, the more it seems to me that I have done well to change the method of my researches. So long as I was content to look at the questions in their generality, and to determine what Catholicism, infallibility, the Church are, I found nothing but abstractions to which I was unable to give a precise meaning. Tired of this fruitless labour, I determined to adopt a new plan. I set myself to study Catholicism in Catholics, the elements of the system in the belief and life of the faithful. This method has succeeded; I have placed myself on more solid ground, and begin to see a little daylight.

I have said that there are three things

needed to make a Catholic—orthodox belief, submission to the Church, participation in the sacraments. One of these points has already occupied us. Catholic faith is, as we have seen, an implicit faith, and the faithful, in the Roman system, is saved by believing what the Church believes, or, what comes to the same thing, by believing in the Church. Thus doctrine is reduced to this single article: all the rest is superfluous.

The second condition of salvation consists in submission to the discipline and government of the Church. It is not necessary to dwell upon this condition. At the bottom it is the same as the preceding one. In a religion whose fundamental doctrine is a doctrine of the Church, one cannot believe in that doctrine without also submitting to the discipline; faith involves obedience, and on this ground I can hardly conceive a schism that would not be a heresy, or a heresy that would not be a schism.

It is not quite the same with the sacraments. If participation in the sacraments

presupposes faith, faith and the sacraments are yet two distinct things, and they constitute two conditions of salvation that should not be confounded.

A sacrament in the Catholic sense is a virtue which effaces sin and produces holiness. It is not simply a symbol which represents such and such a Christian grace; it is a means which God has established (instituted) to communicate these graces to the faithful. Moreover, there are graces which can only be obtained by the ritual act to which they are attached, so that the Christian character and eternal salvation depend on partaking of the sacraments. It is even true to say that the *raison d'être* of the Church resides in the sacrament. Jesus Christ, according to the Catholic theory, confided to His Apostles the deposit of divine grace to spread throughout the world. The Apostles in their turn transmitted this grace to their successors, the bishops, they to others, and so on to the present day. In a word, the Church is a vast body, of which the clergy form the

arteries, and in which, through these sacred channels, circulates the virtue from above. Yes, it is by means of the sacraments that this virtue flows from the clergy to the faithful.

But how is this virtue connected with the sacrament? According to the Catholic Church, it is inherent in the sacrament itself. It is attached either to the substances employed, from the moment they have been consecrated by certain words, or to the very celebration of the ceremony, to the consummation of the act, so that the faithful receives the grace by his material participation in that act, as they say *ex opere operato*. Moreover, the sacrament is null unless the prescribed forms have been exactly observed. Baptism, *e.g.* would not be valid if it were not administered with pure water, or if the officiant omitted one of the words from the prescribed formula.

I will not hide from you the fact that in reading the Canons of Trent and the Articles of the Roman Catechism which treat of this subject, and seeing the Catholic theory of the

sacraments unfolded before my eyes, I have felt a kind of consternation. The pardon of sins communicated by water! Sanctity produced by unction! Christian life attached to rubrics and ceremonies! I had often heard these things attributed to the Catholic Church, but I had always regarded this imputation as a calumny. Thenceforth I could no longer doubt it.

Not that the Roman doctrine is always self-consistent. In fact, if some positive texts attribute the efficacy of the sacrament to the sacramental act itself, there are others which demand certain inward dispositions, either on the part of him who confers the sacrament or on the part of him who receives it. The administrant must intend "to do what the Church does"—that is the usual expression. The faithful, on his part, must not put any obstacle in the way of the sacramental grace, and, in order to partake of the benefits of penance, it is necessary that he should be afflicted on account of his sins. Might it not be supposed from these examples that the

Catholic doctrine is not tainted with the materialism with which it is reproached?

I fear not. All that these passages prove is that the Roman doctrine of the sacraments is self-contradictory. You may find official assertions which attenuate the magical character of the sacrament, but you can never efface that character. It reappears at every turn. Is it a question of Orders? The Church forbids them to be conferred on infants or idiots, but it maintains that if, nevertheless, they have received them, they have been duly ordained. Or of the Eucharist? The Church pretends that the priest retains the power of operating the transubstantiation of the host even if he should be in a state of mortal sin, or even if he should have turned Turk or Pagan. Or Baptism? The Church teaches that a newborn infant, that can take no more part in the ceremony than a stone or an animal, that this infant is regenerated, sanctified, saved by baptism; it teaches that without baptism that same infant cannot go to heaven. After that,

I repeat it, when the Church demands certain inward dispositions we must conclude that it says No after saying Yes, white after black, but certainly not that it abandons the idea of a specific virtue inherent in the sacramental act.

I admit, then, that there are two elements in the sacramental theory of the Roman Church, but, at the same time, I am forced to recognise that the spiritual element is excluded by the whole system, and that it forms an anomaly in that system. This is so true, that you cannot insist on the necessity of moral dispositions without imperilling the whole of Catholicism. We have seen that, not venturing to make of the priest a machine pure and simple, the Church wills that the priest should have the intention to confer the sacrament. This is not much to demand, it is true; and it is too much. It is necessary either to demand more, or else not to demand anything at all. Look at the consequences of this inconsistency. The Catholic Church has a large number of

exemplary priests, but it has many who are indifferent, some who are unbelievers, criminals, and even sacrilegious. There have been Borgias beneath the tiara, De Retzes under the biretta, Contrefattos under the cassock. Far be it from me to make a crime of this to Catholicism, or to hold a whole society responsible for the character of all its members. I merely mention a fact. Suppose that one of these unworthy priests should administer baptism, give absolution, consecrate the host without thinking of what he is doing, or even with the sacrilegious intention of not producing the sacramental effect: there you have a parish in which the communicants are deprived of the body of Christ, penitents of absolution, infants of eternal life. But more than that. Suppose a bishop at whose ordination there has been levity or impiety. He is only a bishop in appearance, he will consecrate priests who are only priests in appearance, and who will spread through endless parishes the nullity of sacrament and the damnation of souls.

These considerations did not escape some of the Fathers of the Council of Trent; they understood very well where the prevalent doctrine would lead them, and they desired entirely to dispense with the intention of the priest as a condition of the validity of the sacrament.

The two elements of the Catholic sacraments, then, do not agree. You may bring them together, but you cannot make them blend. This is why one of them is bound to overcome and stifle the other. Do I need to ask which of them has prevailed? I appeal to you. To which side does the Catholic dogma lean? In what sense has it been developed? Under the empire of what idea does the priest celebrate mass, the faithful partake the Eucharist, the dying call for extreme unction? In a word, what is it that dominates in the system, that constitutes its physiognomy, that determines its character? Clearly it is not the moral obligation imposed on the faithful, but the intrinsic virtue attributed to the sacraments.

I know well that if you make salvation to depend on the sacraments, it is because you regard the sacraments as the source of the Christian grace. Sacraments, according to Catholic teaching, save men because they regenerate, and the Church only attaches eternal happiness to the consummation of the rite after having attached justification and sanctification to that rite. The Church, no doubt, should have the credit of not having forgotten these excellent graces. One ought to say that evangelical spiritualism has known how to obtain from materialism itself some stipulation in favour of its ancient rights. But, alas! this stipulation is illusory. Just now we were face to face with two contradictory assertions; but to connect religion with the matter of the sacrament is more than a contradiction; it is to unite two things between which there is no possible relation. The effect cannot be of a different nature from its cause; matter cannot give birth to spirit; manipulations and Latin formulas cannot make a Christian. When

they pretend to purify the soul by washing the body, and to sanctify the will by applying a chrism, they reduce the Christian virtues to the rank of things sensible. You make the divine grace flow from rubrics; an instructive logic concludes from this that the grace in question is a matter of rites and ceremonies. You represent sanctity as bound to acts which have no intelligible and appreciable connection with sanctity: everybody concludes that this sanctity is not so much a moral state as an external and arbitrary condition of salvation.

I have just used the word arbitrary. No word better expresses the characteristic of Catholic teaching on the means of salvation. This teaching demands, as the condition of eternal life, faith in the infallibility of the Church. By what right? In order that faith may be a condition of salvation, it is necessary that it should produce this salvation—that is to say, it should bring the soul into contact with the truths and facts capable of touching it, humbling it, sanctifying it,

with facts which appeal to the conscience and contain exhortations to a new life. But faith in the Church, in the authority of the Church, the infallibility of the Church, an unconscious and implicit faith, a faith which is in reality the absence of faith, how can it act on the soul, how can such a faith save the sinner?

So also with sacraments. That they may be instruments of salvation they must address themselves to the inner man, and act upon the affections and the will. But this can only be through the religious sense attached by the faithful to the rite. We are not morally influenced by an act that has neither intelligible character nor moral significance. The Catholic sacraments do not need to be understood; they do not seek to move the soul; they are supposed to act directly by the elements employed. Their action is not Christian action; they do not stand in intimate relation with salvation; if they are a condition of salvation they are an arbitrary condition.

After this it would be a waste of time to show in what respects the Catholic idea of a sacrament is contrary to evangelical Christianity. The opposition is not merely one of texts and of the letter; it is in the spirit of the two institutions. The whole genius of the two is different. When you pass from the Gospels and Epistles to the canons of the Council of Trent you pass from one moral atmosphere into another, from Christianity to its counterfeit. This is not too much to say. We are in presence of two religions. The one is internal, the other external. The one requires conviction, the other demands submission. The one is connected with the personal, the other with the official, character of the minister. According to the one, the efficacy depends on the spirit; according to the other the virtue flows from the ritual act. The one inspires emotions and affects the will, the other subjects the life to a system of ceremonies. In one word, the Gospel acts by means of speech, Catholicism by means of sacraments.

If the Catholic theory of the means of salvation is essentially arbitrary, it is, at bottom, because the Catholic notion of salvation is essentially a material one. To you salvation means admission to Paradise, and Paradise is a place of delights, of which St. Peter holds the keys, and into which men enter when they bring the password and certificate. For these gross and irreligious notions substitute a conception more Christian, and the whole edifice of Catholicism tumbles to the ground. Place future felicity not outside but inside a man; make heaven consist in communion with God, the source of beauty, truth, and goodness; recognise that holiness is not so much a condition of salvation as salvation itself, and there will no longer be any room for a doctrine which attaches eternal life to blind faith and baptismal water.

To materialise the idea of religion and of life eternal is a fearful corruption of the Gospel, and if there are sides on which the Catholic Church has fallen into Judaism, it would seem as if on this side it had sunk into

Paganism. But we are not yet at the end; we have not even yet reached the final consequences of the system.

By linking Christianity and salvation to the conditions I have named, Catholicism proclaims that a man cannot be a Christian and be saved without submitting to these conditions. This is the meaning of the famous principle: Outside the Church, no salvation. But see what follows. As the Catholic conditions of salvation are arbitrary, *i.e.* without necessary relation to the Christian life, it follows that a man may be saved without possessing Christian life, and that he may be in possession of Christian life without being saved. In other words, there may be in the Catholic Church believers without piety, and outside that Church true disciples of Christ whom she is obliged to consign to perdition.

Here is a fact that may be verified any day: the evangelical virtues are not confined to Roman orthodoxy. You meet with them among those whom you call heretics. The

humble and contrite heart in which God is pleased to dwell, the faith which renders visible the unseen world, the charity which beareth all things, and the zeal which scours the desert to bring back the wandering—all these things you may find in heretics so-called. In those whom you exclude from heaven you find knowledge of Christ, desire for communion with Him, love of His Word, hope of His glory. You yourself, M. le Curé, have no doubt sometimes seen this spectacle. Tell me, now, what were your feelings as you beheld these people who, though they did not bear the seal of your sacraments, yet bore the impress of the Gospel? Did you not involuntarily salute in them the children of God, the heirs of eternal life? Take care! For in that case you tacitly denied the Catholic faith, the essence of which is exclusiveness. Or perhaps you doubted the reality of the virtues that shone before your eyes; perhaps you tried to explain them by pride, enthusiasm, party spirit; perhaps you called them by

opprobrious names. If so, permit me to inform you, you blasphemed.

The other day I occupied myself in running through the New Testament. Among the passages that arrested my attention was one that had often struck me. You know the passage well. Jesus had just healed a man who had been blind and dumb. The Pharisees had seen the miracle, but instead of recognising it as a manifestation of the power and love of God, they attributed it to a compact between Jesus and Beelzebub. The Lord heard them and answered them in these terrible words: "All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men; but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men" (Matt. xii. 31).

M. le Curé, What was the sin of these Pharisees? They refused to admit that God was with one who was not one of themselves. They had seen a holy work, and, urged by the spirit of sect, they had closed their eyes, they had silenced their conscience, they had explained good by evil, and divine grace by

the influence of the evil one. See now the straits to which your Church has been reduced. Like the Pharisees, it regards itself as having the monopoly of salvation, and it has bound the grace of God to external conditions. By these means it has taken upon itself to deny the possibility of eternal life outside its pale. And when it has met with this Christian life, pure, devoted, unmistakable, it has found itself bound to misunderstand it, and even to vilify it. It has thus come to call good evil and evil good, to cast its venom on all that dares to be holy without being catholic; it is thus that it has been condemned to blaspheme the Holy Ghost whenever He manifests His power beyond the confines of the communion of Rome.

Condemned to blaspheme the Holy Ghost! What a judgment of God upon the Catholic Church! What a curse pronounced upon that mixture of sectarianism and formalism which marks the Church of Rome! But I refrain. It is very painful to me to speak

so rigorously. I wish I could doubt the evidence. I try to persuade myself that I have wrongly read the texts, misunderstood the doctrines, badly drawn my conclusions. I hope you will convince me of error or exaggeration. I await your answer with impatience. How happy I should be to find that I had been mistaken in my appreciation of the principles of Catholicism.

SEVENTH LETTER

CATHOLIC MORALITY

M. LE CURÉ—There remains one point to consider before I can complete my study, viz. Confession. The teaching of the Church has made known to us the belief of the faithful; the sacraments have indicated to us the source from which they draw the grace they need. Confession must now show to us the Catholic in active life. In other words, we have considered what pertains to dogma and to rite; it remains to us to study the morals of Catholicism.

I know a member of your communion who, after passing part of his life in indifference to spiritual things, came one day to a better mind. Determined to become a good Catholic, he addressed himself to a priest

and asked him how he should proceed. "Choose a confessor," replied the priest. I do not know whether you will agree with me, but to me the answer seemed significant. Confession, although it does not hold a very prominent place in the expositions of the Catholic system, is nevertheless the fly-wheel of the system. It is by means of it that Catholicism passes from theory to practice, enters into contact with the masses, penetrates the life of individuals, seats itself by the domestic hearth, applies itself, imposes itself.

. . . . . .

What morality becomes in the hands of the priest who receives confessions may be described in one word; it becomes casuistry. I have nothing here to say of the abominable details contained in the manuals of your seminaries which, after polluting the imagination of your ecclesiastics, proceed to astonish vice itself behind the grating of the confessional. Those are terrible consequences of the system, but

consequences which are justified the moment you admit the principle of casuistry. That principle is the appreciation of actions from a purely external point of view. In fact, the priest, who cannot penetrate into the consciences of men, and who, consequently, is obliged to judge of faults without knowing intentions,—the priest is inevitably led to consider sin as consisting entirely in the act which is confessed. It is with him as with a doctor who confounds the symptoms with the malady, and who therefore fails to go to the root of the matter. Life appears to him, not in the unity of its tendencies, but as a certain sum of actions, good or bad. He studies moral phenomena in their isolation. He preoccupies himself with sins rather than with sin, and with pious works rather than with the Christian life. In judging of the value of actions he adopts a purely material standard. He weighs the accidental circumstances in which the facts are accomplished. He is great at distinguishing. According to him, there are duties which are binding on

all men. These are *precepts*. But there are others which are simply *counsels* of perfection. There are *mortal sins*, which are incompatible, and *venial sins*, which are compatible with grace. There are cases which are foreseen, for which there is a fixed jurisprudence; there are also unforeseen cases which are regulated according to probability. There is a negative love which consists in not hating God, and this love is obligatory; but there is a positive love which consists in formal acts of love to God, and it suffices to perform some of these acts occasionally, say once in every five years. It would be inexcusable to kill a robber to save one ducat, or even five. Confession has engendered casuistry, and, thanks to casuistry, Catholic morality has become that which everybody knows, the morality exposed by the *Provincial Letters*, and against which public honesty has raised a cry of reprobation.

Confession presents itself to us in the same character when we examine the part played in it by the faithful.

The faithful is bound to declare all his sins, especially all the mortal sins that he may have committed since his last confession. In other words, he proceeds by way of enumeration and distinction. That is enough for me. The Catholic notion of sin reveals itself in this single trait; it is external, superficial, Judaic. It consists in considering the material act instead of regarding the disposition of the heart. The man who enters seriously into himself, and who prostrates himself before the majesty of God, finds in his conscience not so much what he has done as what he is; his life presents itself to him not as a series of actions, but as a state of his desires and affections. He does not draw up a catalogue of his doings to approve the one and excuse or condemn the other; he does not seek to draw a line of demarcation between those sins that have been pardoned and those for which he still needs absolution; that is the rôle of the Pharisee in the parable. The Christian simply condemns himself; he

knows that in him there is nothing but sin and misery; his best actions, the most beneficent, disinterested, and heroic, appear to him tainted with selfishness and worldliness; he only feels one need—to smite upon his breast and cry "God be merciful to me the sinner."

You will perhaps reply that only God can read the heart, and that the faithful is obliged to enumerate his acts in order to guide the priest in his appreciation of his moral state. But no, you will not say this; for this would be to give to confession a meaning that it could not have. If the aim of confession is not the absolution of sins but the spiritual education of Christians, if confession ceases to be that mechanical and palpable act which is terminated by some act of penance, by a few fasts or *aves*, if it ceases to be this in order to become a delicate operation of religious therapeutics; in a word, if confession presupposes intelligence and piety on the part of the confessor, well then, it will be necessary to shut up the confessional.

Either venture to affirm that a supernatural virtue of the Holy Spirit transforms all your priests into St. Cyrans and Fénelons, or recognise that the confessor does not in general look beyond external acts. Acknowledge that by that very fact confession falsifies the moral sense of the faithful, that it strikes at every profound idea of sin, that it travesties repentance, and that, in the last analysis, it is but a parody of the secret commerce of the soul with God. Of course, one can conceive that an enlightened director of consciences may transform confession by spiritualising it; but, on the contrary, it is in the nature of things that confession constantly tends to degenerate into formalism.

Is that all? No. If confession destroys morality by tampering with the sense of sin, if it destroys it by replacing it by casuistry, it destroys it still more effectually perhaps by relieving a man from his personal responsibility in order to hand him over to the direction of another. It is not enough that the priest shall believe for the laity, that he

shall transmit to them the grace of the sacraments; he must put himself in the place of the conscience of the faithful. But if vicarious belief is not belief, what shall we say of a conscience that abdicates its functions? What shall we say of a Church which imposes that abdication as one of the conditions of piety and salvation?

I admit that the bulk of the faithful do not appear to be disposed to resent so odious a pretension. Not that the direction of conscience responds to a legitimate need of the human heart, but rather because it accords with perverted instincts. If men voluntarily cast upon the priest the interests of their salvation, it is because their conscience is to them a burden. Moral responsibility weighs upon them. One really must give some attention to the affairs of one's soul, but then happily there is a way of escape—one can put one's soul under direction.

But, sir, a man cannot strike such a blow at human dignity with impunity. His conscience does not belong to him; it is not his

own to do what he likes with it; he cannot renounce it without sacrilege. In order to be able to give himself to God, a man must belong to himself, and he does not belong to himself when he has handed over to another the direction of his conscience. His first duty is to be a man, and in order to be a man he must retain in his own hands the direction and the regulation of his soul. By abandoning himself to a confessor he sacrifices his manhood. He becomes a moral eunuch, as impotent for virtue as for vice. He becomes a slave.

This suggests to me a final reflection. You know how widely Catholic peoples differ from Protestant. You have travelled, perhaps, and have observed a phenomenon that is becoming every year more striking. Pass from France to England, from Italy to Switzerland, from a Lutheran to a Catholic village in Alsace, compare the Spanish with the Anglo-Saxon colonies; go where you will, and wherever you find the two Confessions side by side, you will find that the

Protestants have the advantage in enlightenment, in industry, in material prosperity. This fact has been explained in various ways. How do you account for it? It cannot be explained by difference of race, for then it would be necessary to account for the affinity of certain races for certain beliefs. Besides, the contrast is often manifested in the same population. I do not attribute a directly religious value to the social superiority of Protestantism. The prosperity of the peoples that have freed themselves from Rome is not always in proportion to their Christian life. On another side it is to a religious difference that is due the difference of development and of culture. The Reformation delivered the faithful from the priest to restore him to himself, because it had to restore him to himself in order to restore him to God. It taught him that in order to be a Christian he must be a man. It led him to inward independence, to individual energy, to self-government. By this means it laid the foundations of a new world, and sub-

stituted a new civilisation for the Catholic civilisation, a new society for the society of the Middle Age.

But I am forgetting myself. Quite unwittingly I have assumed an aggressive tone instead of the tone of doubt and inquiry. It is not entirely my fault, however. This is my seventh letter, and you have not yet sent me a word in return. My objections no doubt seem to you very puerile, my questions hardly worthy of reply. Still, their very insignificance should have tempted you to an easy refutation, to a facile victory. Will you kindly bear in mind that I do not pose before you as a warrior, but present myself simply as a catechumen desirous of instruction from his pastor.

EIGHTH LETTER

THE PRINCIPLE OF CATHOLICISM

M. LE CURÉ—We have analysed Catholicism. Its doctrine, its sacraments, have passed before us. I would now sum up the results of our researches, and determine, if possible, what is the general characteristic of the system. Let us try to discover the formative principle of Catholicism. It seems to me that controversy has not occupied itself sufficiently with this question of principle, or, at all events, that it has been content with very superficial answers. There are Protestants who believe they find the mother-idea of the Roman Church either in Papal infallibility, or in the authority of tradition, or in errors such as those relating to the dogma of justification, or in a gross

idea of sacramental virtue, or in the sacrifice of the mass, in the worship of the Virgin and the saints, etc. It seems to me that we must dig deeper to get at the fundamental principle of Catholicism. Need I add that I should not venture upon this new task if I did not feel that your eye was upon me? More than ever I shall need your warnings and advice. Your strength must supplement my weakness, as your charity must excuse the boldness of my criticism. Accursed criticism! Why should I have been born Protestant, and why cannot I admit anything without good reasons?

Unless I am mistaken, Catholicism is simply the satisfaction of a general tendency of humanity. Every man is more or less divided between the need of seeking God and the need of avoiding Him, between the duty of living in His service and the desire to live for self, between the fear of the consequences of a worldly life and repugnance to a life devoted to the interests of the soul, in short, between the necessity of having a

religion and the convenience of being without one. This contradiction is easily explained. Religion, in its essence, consists in absolute abandonment to the direction of the all-holy God; it is a new spirit, a divine spirit taking in us the place of our own spirit. Christianity demands renunciation, and on the portals of the kingdom of heaven it is written that he who will save his life must lose it. But the flesh shrinks from this sacrifice. This abandonment disturbs the egoism that forms the very substance of sin, and the foundation of our evil nature. Hence the compromise of which I speak. In this tragic conflict man begins to compound. Not deliberately, however, and with entire consciousness, but instinctively and in self-deception. The seat of religion is the soul—that is to say, that in us which thinks, and feels, and wills, the moral being, the spiritual life; the exterior, the form, are secondary, and have no value except as the manifestation and expression of the inner life. Well, man effects a sort of arrange-

ment by which he reserves the inward to himself and abandons the outward to God; he refuses his affections and he gives his acts; he rejects the worship in spirit and in truth, and on the other hand submits to the most painful exigences, to the most exacting ceremonies. "Anything," he exclaims, "anything, exactions, observances, macerations, martyrdom itself, provided that in the secret places of my life I belong to myself; everything except my liberty; everything except myself; everything except—everything."

Many religions, M. le Curé, originate in a compromise of this kind. There is not perhaps a single form of Paganism that does not betray at once the consciousness of God and of His claims, and the will to live apart from Him. Judaism itself, no doubt because it was a preparatory religion, and therefore a religion of accommodation, consecrated to God the outer man, but was not able to produce affection and voluntary obedience. It is the same with Catholicism.

Catholicism was the outcome of the weakening of the spiritual life in the Church. Its birth marks a fall in Christian society. At the beginning the Spirit of God took full possession of the human soul. The impulse was irresistible, the fervour extraordinary. The nearness of the evangelical facts, the ardours of proselytism, the perils of martyrdom maintained and fed the sacred fire. The grain of mustard seed became a mighty and far-spreading tree. The thread of water at which a few wayfarers quenched their thirst swelled into a mighty river, and, fed by numerous affluents, enlarged its bed and rolled its waters to the sea. You know what followed. The waters gathered much from all the soils through which they flowed; they gained in volume, but they lost in purity. This seems to be a law of religious movements. The golden age of a Church is that in which its members gather in the upper room. By and by it emerges from this narrow circle, it marches towards its destiny, it subjugates the world, it wins the multitude,

those who are influenced by example, carried away by numbers, seduced by novelty, but who are really strangers to a large extent to the faith they have embraced. They are, nevertheless, regarded as members of the Church, and the Church is profoundly modified by their presence. The level of religious life is lowered. The inner principle which hitherto has sustained it is wanting. And wherever that principle is wanting the soul inevitably attaches itself to what is external. Lacking spiritual energy, it relies on that which is visible and sensible. In this way compromise is born. The religion of the senses takes the place of the religion of the soul, the spirit of worship is replaced by outward forms. Devotion becomes external. Men become Christians no longer by conversion of the heart, by the direction of the will and of the affections, but by the observance of certain rites and the application of certain specifics. The water of baptism washes away sin, absolution remits penalty, the Eucharist communicates the grace

attached to the very food they eat. The whole life is surrounded by a network of observances by which salvation is effected. In a word, instead of being spiritual as it was at the beginning, as it is in its essence, its origin, in its elements, in its earliest disciples, the Gospel becomes sacramental.

At the same time it becomes sacerdotal. The tendency which leads the Christian to confound that which is spiritual with that which is mere ritual, the need of having a religion that is not a religion, of having a piety which does not involve communion with God, a faith which brings with it no obligation or very little obligation—this tendency, this need, have given rise to religion by proxy. To place religion in the hands of the priest, what is this but another means of pushing it to the circumference, if I may so say, in order to exclude it more effectually from the centre, the soul? Such is the origin of the priest, of the priest charged with the duty of believing and deciding for the faithful; such is the origin of authori-

tative belief and of the direction of conscience.

Moreover, the theory of the sacraments presupposes the priest. They are the channels, as we have seen, of those magical graces which, according to this deplorable theology, originating in Christ Himself, are transmitted from the apostles to the bishops, ftom the bishops to the priests, from the priests to the faithful.

The Catholic priesthood and the Catholic sacraments are so veritably the products of the same need, the elements of the same system, that the priest may be said to be the sacrament personified. The sacrament acts by itself independently of all spiritual conditions; and so the action of the priest, in the Roman theory of the means of grace, is independent of the moral worth of the priest. Nothing measures more accurately the change that took place in the Church when it passed from the apostolic to the Catholic régime than the change effected simultaneously in the idea of the Christian ministry. At the

outset the Christian character of the pastor was the chief consideration; by degrees the official character of the priest came to be exclusively regarded.

The priesthood now fulfils another function. Alongside the power of orders there is, as it is said, the power of jurisdiction; in other words, alongside the sacramental there is the hierarchical element. As the sacrament represents Christian grace, so the hierarchy represents Christian unity. Grace and unity are spiritual realities, inward excellences which have escaped from the Catholic Church, but which it believes it retains, and which it pleases itself by contemplating in empty forms—forms which it prizes the more highly because they are all that remain to it. The true unity is the union of all Christians in the love, the service, and the fellowship of Jesus Christ. Christendom, feeling this living unity escaping it little by little in consequence of its own religious decadence, wished to express in a manner apparent to the senses the glorious ideal it

had beheld. The clergy representing the Church, and now become the Church *par excellence*, naturally presented the signs, and, in some sort, the symbolic materials of which it had need. The pastor, the bishop, the metropolitan were the stages in this hierarchy. Many ages laboured at the mystic edifice. The thirst for visible unity was only satisfied when the whole Church found itself personified in a single individual.

It is easily seen what rôle the priest plays in this vast system by means of which the Church puts the form in the place of the substance, the appearance in the place of the reality, the symbol in the place of the thing signified, the sacraments in the place of piety, the minister in the place of religion. But the priest is something more than this. Degenerate as it is, the Church has still preserved some memory of the mission entrusted to it; and it is the clergy, as the representatives and ministers of the Church, upon whom the burden of the fulfilment of that mission falls. The clergy thus find themselves

charged with the instruction of the crude, indifferent masses of the people who desire nothing better than to abandon themselves to the direction of the priest. In addition to its sacramental and symbolic rôle, therefore, the priesthood has been charged with an important pedagogic rôle. And this leads to a new aspect of Catholicism.

The members of the Church, let me repeat it once more, are persons who have handed over the care of their spiritual interests to the clergy, or who have not handed it over because they have never possessed it. They have never attained their intellectual and moral majority. They have therefore fallen into tutelage. That tutelage is exercised by the priests. The Roman Church has undertaken to lead humanity in leading-strings, and the superficial character, the materialistic tendency, the accommodations of the Gospel, all the vices of Catholicism, may be regarded as consequences more or less inevitable of the pedagogic functions which that Church believes itself called to discharge.

It is a question of the masses, whose Christian education is very defective. For men in that condition religion cannot be the pure, personal, spiritual religion of the Gospel. Here, on the other hand, is a religion imposed by authority. It is, moreover, a legal religion—that is to say, instead of penetrating the man as a principle of life and liberty, this religion offers itself to him as a law, and acts on him as a form; it imprisons him in its observances, it regulates him instead of inspiring him, constrains him instead of influencing him, threatens him instead of winning him. Most of the faithful are still under the Old Testament because they are not yet ready for the New. They still need symbols, ceremonies, laws, because they are not capable of receiving the truth in its purity. They are still in the flesh, how could they bear the régime of the spirit? It is with reason that men speak of the Judaism of the Catholic Church. Catholicism is not Christianity; at best it is a preparation for Christianity.

Do I say this by way of reproach? By no means. The spiritual nonage of the masses, their inability to comprehend a religion so elevated as the Gospel, is a fact, and therefore the tutelage of these masses falls of itself into the hands of him who is zealous enough to seize it, or powerful enough to exercise it. I go further. I believe that every pastor of a church, in the present state of Christendom, inevitably exercises a function of this kind, because every church is inevitably composed, for the most part, of weaklings and children. In this world the Christian is never entirely spiritual, and consequently is never altogether independent of the tutelage of which I speak. In a sense we are all minors, we are all a part of the people of promise and of preparation. And is it not the noblest work of a religious society gradually to elevate humanity to the level at which it can appreciate the Gospel? What I blame in Catholicism is this. If ecclesiastical action is an education, the Church ought not to forget that the aim of

education is to lead the youth to manhood, and thus to independence. The teacher cannot without injury misconceive the purely relative character of the means he employs, or attribute to those means a value other than an educative one. Now that is exactly what the Catholic Church has done. Instead of seeking to bring the Christian into a state in which he could dispense with it, it sets itself to hold him for ever; instead of aiming at the gradual enfranchisement of the faithful, it binds them in a thousand chains; instead of seeing in them future men, it sees in them an inferior race devoted to perpetual servitude; instead of preparing them for personal and independent religion, it concentrates its efforts on the work of stifling in them every aspiration of the kind.

And as it has not recognised how temporary is its rôle, so it has not recognised how relative are the means it employs. In this respect also it stands at the point of view of Judaism, which, like Catholicism, held itself to be a final form of religion, and regarded it

as a blasphemy to suggest that there might be a new and better system. This is easily explained. In order to fulfil its pedagogic task, Catholicism was obliged to present itself as a positive institution of God; and this in perfect good faith.

However strange the illusion may appear, the belief arose that the Roman Church was the form of Christianity itself, and therefore the final and external form of religion. From that time all the institutions of Catholicism have been clothed with this absolute character. We have had a new theocracy, a theocracy beyond which there was nothing to expect, because it constituted the perfect and final revelation of God.

But I pause. The pedagogic rôle of Catholicism presupposes legal action, this presupposes divine institution, regarded as the very essence of the Christian revelation, and draws from that pretension a definitive and absolute character. This last point is fundamental. I must return to it in another letter.

NINTH LETTER

THE PRINCIPLE OF CATHOLICISM (*continued*)

M. LE CURÉ—Catholicism is absolute truth. Doctrine, worship, constitution, everything about it bears this character. Being one with Christianity, it has all its authority. Being a revelation of God to the world, it is the definitive form of religion. In a word, Catholicism is supernatural, supernaturally instituted, supernaturally maintained, and, in a world where all is changing and imperfect, it alone is free from this condition of all human things.

Such is the fundamental datum of the Catholic system.

It is because it is absolute that it is exclusive. Since it is religious truth under a pure and perfect form, it cannot tolerate any

difference on any point whatever. No diversity can be admitted. Does one of the faithful imagine that he may think differently on any point of doctrine from the Church? He is a heretic. Does he set himself up against any of the consecrated forms? Then he is a schismatic. And as the truth is not divided, as one cannot possess it except on condition of possessing it in its entirety, as, finally, truth is life, the heretic and the schismatic, in separating themselves from the Church, deprive themselves of eternal salvation.

Exclusivism has sometimes been defended. It has been maintained that it is of the very essence of truth to be exclusive. A proposition and its opposite, it has been said, cannot both be true. Yes and no cannot be reconciled. Mathematical axioms, the formulas which express natural laws, political or social principles, in so far as they are well founded, imply the error of their opposites. Those who speak thus are doubly irrelevant, beside the question. In the first place, they compare truths of an entirely different order.

In the second, they confound truth as it is in itself with the human and individual conception of that truth. The question is not whether a thing can be at once true and false, whether it can be and not be; it is whether any man has the right to identify his opinions with the truth, so that what may be affirmed of the one may be affirmed of the other. And so we come face to face with our question. May man pretend to the possession of absolute truth?

Some employ physical and mathematical truths as an analogy. But they mistake the particular nature of religious truth. There are facts which are perceived by the senses, and their reality is recognised by every man whose perceptions are normal and healthy. There are propositions whose certainty rests on the very constitution of the human mind; every unclouded intellect is convinced of their truth. Now, as most men enjoy the use of their senses and their reason, it follows that most men are agreed on the points of which I speak and that truths of the physical

and the mathematical order are held to be self-evident. Does it follow that it is the same with truths of the moral and religious order? By no means. Why are the first self-evident? Because we are not free to recognise them or not, as the case may be, because our will cannot obscure them to our eyes, because we have no interest in calling them in question. But it is entirely different with other truths. They are moral, *i.e.* they belong to the sphere of liberty; hence they are not self-evident; religion would cease to be what it is if it could be proved as we prove that two and two make four.

This is where the Catholics err. Catholicism considers that it is in possession of absolute truth. That is to say it regards its doctrines as self-evident. The two pretensions, in fact, are one. Relative truth is that which varies with individuals, because not being self-evident, it may be understood differently, partially recognised, or even rejected. Absolute truth, on the contrary, is that which is always the same for all, that

which cannot be explained except by self-evidence. The true thought of Catholicism, even when it is not avowed or taken into account, the basis of its theory, is the self-evidentness of the rights of the Church. I have already been led to this idea while studying the proofs of Catholicism; I am now brought to it again.

But Catholicism is not content with repelling those who permit themselves some liberty of opinion in matters of faith; it aspires to pursue them; it seeks to chastise them. Catholicism, therefore, is not only exclusive, it is also and necessarily intolerant. What, in fact, is the principle of toleration? It is the persuasion that religious truth cannot be made so evident that all minds shall be obliged to recognise it. It is also the persuasion that this truth, pure and absolute in its source, ceases to be so when it takes form in the human mind, because man is at once a limited and imperfect being. It results from these principles that religious truths are modified for each one according

to his natural faculties, his knowledge, his intellectual and moral development. It also follows that none of us has either the right or the power to impose his beliefs on others, *i.e.* to force them to see as we see. We should seek to convince; we cannot constrain others to believe.

The whole history of toleration confirms what has now been advanced. A most instructive book, let me say in passing, might be written on this subject. It would be seen that this great conquest of modern times has been gradually achieved as experience, doubt, controversy have shaken consecrated systems, have also shaken the simple faith of the human race in absolute truth. At the same time it would be seen why this conquest is still so uncertain; man learns to doubt slowly and with difficulty; he is naturally dogmatic; a profound culture is necessary to accustom one to see everywhere a mixture of truth in error, of error in truth; moreover, the masses readily believe in pure truth, and are always ready to refuse tolerance to others after

having claimed it for themselves. In every man there is by nature the raw material of an inquisitor, and the spirit of persecution is always on the point of awaking in the heart of every man that abandons himself to his own instincts.

Rigour in the cause of religion is part of the uniform tradition of your Church. One might prepare a long list of Catholic witnesses in favour of persecution. One might put at the head the writings of St. Augustine against the Donatists. One might draw with both hands from the Canon Law of the Middle Ages. One might recall with what abundance of precedents the Bollandists established the legitimacy of the proceedings of St. Dominic. One might cite M. de Maistre and his rehabilitation of the Spanish Inquisition in the *Univers*, and his apology for armed missions. The Church has used cruelty against error whenever it has had the power. It does so still. It arms itself with the temporal power wherever it can. And in this the Church is simply obeying the

principle of self-evidence in matters of faith. When a man has but to open his eyes in order to see, when the truth necessarily strikes his mind, unbelief can only be explained by perversity, by an evil will, by bad faith, and you can only hope to overcome such perversity by the dungeon and the stake.

There is another feature of Catholicism that is explained in the same way. I refer to its theocratic tendency. The Roman Church cannot be content to exercise a purely spiritual influence over the peoples, nor even to form an independent society within the State. It aspires, as by an invisible force, to seize the temporal government of the nations. It begins by asking for liberty, it soon claims privilege, it ends by demanding submission. The priest does not seek to become king; but he seeks to rule the king, which is only a surer way of reigning. The State, they insinuate, ought to become a Catholic State, religious laws should form the law of the State, the citizen should be an orthodox Christian. A political power that is not subordinate to

the spiritual power is an atheistic power. The nations sigh after unity and do not see that social unity can only exist by means of the supremacy of the priesthood. So speaks the Church, and, in speaking thus, she simply obeys the inner logic of her principles. In fact, if Catholicism be true, and if her truth be self-evident, Catholicism can and ought to become the universal social law. Religious obligation ceasing to depend on individual conviction, why should it not be made into a civil duty? If every man can recognise the divinity of a symbol there is no reason why that symbol should not be made one of the conditions of the social contract. If every citizen has only to will in order to believe, he ought not to complain at being compelled to do what is at once so easy and so necessary.

The absolute character of Catholicism constitutes at once its strength and its weakness.

It constitutes its strength. It is by this that it imposes on most minds; it is by this that it seduces those who are not able to

examine for themselves; it is by this that it appears as divine in the midst of what is human, as certain in the midst of what is uncertain, as consistent in the midst of that which is contradictory.

Other systems pretend to the same character, but Catholicism has this advantage over them; it is more positive in its pretensions, more absolute in its principles. Now the absolute, being one of the needs or one of the illusions of man, it is in the most absolute of absolute systems that man will naturally seek the satisfaction of this appetite. The advertisement here is everything. He who makes the finest promises attracts the customer too inexperienced or too preoccupied to examine the quality of the merchandise.

But the cause of success becomes the source of danger. The more exaggerated the pretensions, the more they impose on ages and classes unable to judge them, but the more easily also are they reduced to their true value when the progress of public intelligence permits men to compare the

advertisement with the reality. An absolute pretension to absoluteness must eventually break to pieces against the knowledge of facts. This is what is happening under our eyes. Society is making great and constant progress in all kinds of knowledge, and the consequence is that the Catholic thesis is becoming every day more difficult to maintain. This is inevitable. The Roman Church has introduced into religion a multitude of elements of a purely relative or temporary value, and it has pretended to elevate them all to the dignity of revealed and absolute truth. Now there is nothing absolute on earth, or rather there is nothing absolute, universal, eternal, but that which belongs to the essence of human life, the religious sense and the moral sense. The word of Christ is ever new and ever young because it addresses itself entirely to the constant needs of sinful man. Mix with it all kinds of metaphysical, historical, juridical theses, and you make of it something like the feet of Nebuchadnezzar's statue, you have mixed clay with iron, and

when public right has changed, when events have marched, and in marching have sown seeds of knowledge, when the philosophy of your period has been modified, it is found that your religion has been smitten with decay.

TENTH LETTER

THE HISTORY OF CATHOLICISM

M. LE CURÉ—The *History of Variations* is a very beautiful book, perhaps the most beautiful of those that came from Bossuet's pen. One cannot too much admire the great bishop's learning, the sagacity with which he disentangles the subtleties of the doctors, the ease with which he moves amongst the numerous elements of controversy, the authority with which he dominates the whole debate. And yet the *History of the Variations of Protestantism* is a failure, because the datum from which the author starts is false. Bossuet fell into an error that I have already pointed out, and from which it would seem that Catholic writers cannot free themselves. He regarded Protestantism as an

exact counterpart of Catholicism. He saw in it a determinate system of doctrines and instructions. He pictured it under the form of one vast Church. Hence he imagined that Protestants were *solidaire* with each other, Calvinists with Lutherans, the pastors of Charenton with the reformers of the sixteenth century. In a word, in spite of the admirable suppleness of his genius, he was unable to place himself entirely at the point of view that he assailed, and to recognise that the Protestant is, as we should say to-day, an individualist, and consequently a man who is comparatively indifferent to the question whether Luther sometimes altered his opinions, and whether the Churches which separated from the Roman Church have always been faithful to their Confessions of Faith.

I am aware that Protestants have given only too many grounds for the mistake in question. It is not merely that they have gradually become conscious of the principle that they represent, and of the consequences

of that principle. For two centuries they have vied with each other in repudiating that religious individualism which was the true meaning of the Reformation. Nay, the reformers themselves were not aware of the bearing of the work they accomplished. Like Rome, like Bossuet, they believed in absolute truth, they attached the greatest importance to unity of doctrine, they regarded themselves as the defenders of orthodoxy. Hence they imagined themselves to have substituted a church for the Roman Church, the true Church for the false. Nor need we be surprised at this. The design of God is always greater than the intention of the men who are called to execute it. Luther, Zwingle, Calvin, forced a door which has ever since remained open, which no one can ever close again, and through which we may surely pass to-day without taking upon us the responsibility for their opinions.

But if the fundamental character of Protestantism does not permit us to regard Protestants as bound together by anything

but the principle of the individuality of belief, it is otherwise with Catholics. Catholicism supposes the closest solidarity between the Church and its heads, between the Church and its past. It is on this point that I would dwell. Catholicism cannot be divine, the Catholic Church cannot be infallible, unless they were instituted by Jesus Christ and His Apostles, and unless they have remained faithful through the ages to that institution. This divine work must have shown itself always identical with itself, it must always have had the same principles, the same doctrines, the same organisation. Such, I need not remind you, is the pretension of the Catholic system. It claims to have been expressly established by the Lord. It discovers its forms in those of the Apostolic Church. It affirms that it has not changed, and that, amid the endless vicissitudes of ideas and things, it alone remains as immutable as the God of Whom it is the handiwork and revelation.

It is a bold pretension, but it has the

advantage by its very boldness of reducing the question to the simplest terms. Change is so universally the law of things on earth that the immutability of an institution may well be regarded as a miracle, and, consequently, as a sign of the divine origin of that institution. If Catholicism has always remained the same, as it claims to have done, we must cease to discuss with it, God has spoken in its favour, the seal of the supernatural is stamped upon its brow.

It will be easy to establish the miracle. It is with it as with the pretension to absolute truth of which I spoke, and of which the pretension to immutability is, at bottom, but the consequence. How is it possible not to recognise the edifice which alone stands erect amid the dust of empires? How is it possible not to distinguish at a glance the immovable rock from the restless waves, which dash themselves against its sides? You say that Catholicism is invariable; very well, but if so, the phenomenon must be

manifest, all history must bear witness to so magnificent a prodigy.

History teaches, on the contrary, that Catholicism has shared the fate of all things human. It had its period of growth, its epoch of maturity and power, after which it gradually declined until it entered upon that state of senility in which we find it to-day. All its institutions have changed, all ages bear traces of its variations. The Christianity of the New Testament contains nothing analogous to the organisation which arose half a century later. Primitive Catholicism differs entirely from the Church of the Apostles; it differs hardly less from later Catholicism. From a simple elder, the bishop becomes first the pastor and representative of the flock; it is only afterwards that he becomes bishop in the hierarchical sense of the word. Once constituted, the episcopate, properly speaking, will undergo many successive modifications. Above the diocesan bishop will be placed the metropolitan, then the patriarch, then the Pope. The Bishop

of Rome was not at first the vicar of Christ and the lawgiver of Christendom. In the third century the primacy of the Roman patriarchs was simply honorary, or rather symbolic. It did not imply any subordination of other bishops to their powerful *confrère*; he was simply the successor of Peter, and, as such, the first among equals. Little by little that which was simply rank becomes authority; the Pope regards himself as the vicar of the prince of the Apostles, and, in some sort, as universal metropolitan. Later still, the vicar of Peter becomes the vicar of Christ, the sovereign pontiff concentrates and absorbs in his person all ecclesiastical powers, and the other bishops are simply his delegates. The dogma of papal infallibility was bound to follow these evolutions. The bishops of Rome were at first boasted of for the purity of their faith and the constancy of their orthodoxy. Soon these assertions went further: the chair of Peter could not err. Afterwards what was affirmed of the See was transferred implicitly to the

individual that occupied it, and they went so far as to exclaim: *Dominus Deus noster Papa!*

In this way Catholicism has changed in matters of government. From being episcopal it has become papal. Its constitution was aristocratic and representative; it has now taken the form of an absolute monarchy. But this change is not the only one. The Council of Trent modified all the conditions of the Catholic faith by defining that which was previously indeterminate, and by thus suppressing that dogmatic liberty which the faithful had enjoyed under the previous system. The Reformation acted differently but still more profoundly on Catholicism. By destroying the religious unity of the West it destroyed the prestige of the Church which called itself one, unique, and universal. Moreover, after the Reformation, society became enfranchised, states were secularised, and Rome was deprived of its European suzerainty. Formerly, a word from the sovereign pontiff armed a

thousand hands against the rebellious prince, against heretical populations. To-day, Rome, deprived of all support in men's beliefs, can neither regain its temporal power nor do without it.

Nor have changes in Catholicism been wanting in our own times. In the sixteenth century the centre of the system was in doctrine; on this point all discussion turned; according to this rule the merits of the various confessions were judged. The first question always was, What does the Roman Church say about man's primeval state, about the Fall, Justification, Sacraments? Bossuet, Möhler himself twenty years ago regarded controversy from this point of view. Ah, well, Möhler has become antiquated. Dogmatics are no longer to the front. Catholicism has reduced all its doctrine to the single point of the infallibility of the Church.[1] It has no other belief to-day. From its point of view there cannot be any question as to whether a dogma is clear, true,

[1] And since then to the dogma of Papal Infallibility.—TR.

Scriptural, based on the nature of God and man, fitted to sanctify souls. Supposing this could be demonstrated by Catholicism, supposing the demonstration were not dangerous inasmuch as it implied an appeal to individual judgment, it is manifest that it is superfluous. Why so much circumlocution? Do you believe in the infallibility of the Church, or do you not? If you do not you had better get converted. If you do, your first duty is confidence and submission. That is the language of modern Catholicism, of which Joseph de Maistre may be regarded as the father. Now, M. le Curé, you are too familiar with the history of Catholic ideas and institutions not to see in this a profound modification of the ancient orthodoxy.

This is so true, the variations of Catholicism are so patent, the progress of historical studies has set them in so clear a light, that the defenders of the Church have been obliged to acknowledge the fact. They have, at the same time, changed their position so as to present a new face to the

enemy. When the history of France was written by the Vellys and the Villarets, Pharamond, Merovius, and Clovis were represented crown on head, sceptre in hand, and enthroned, after the manner of Louis XIV. When anti-Protestant polemics were conducted by the Bellarmines and the Du Perrons, St. Peter, St. Linus, and St. Cletus were represented as popes after the pattern of Innocent III., of Boniface, and Sixtus Quintus. To-day the fiction is too transparent. They have been obliged to replace it by something more specious. We shall see how this has been effected.

The new explanation is called the theory of development. We are now reminded (as though Catholicism had not formerly held the opposite view) that God does not intervene suddenly and violently in things human, but that He adapts Himself to the conditions of the life of peoples, and submits, in some sort, to the laws of history. Thus, say they, the eternal does not throw down on the earth institutions fully formed; so far

from that, He gradually introduces those that He wishes to establish, He cultivates them in the shade, He allows them to grow up by themselves until at last they have reached that perfect development that astonishes men and delights the angels. It is with them as with a seed, frail, almost invisible; it is cast into the ground; it slowly pierces the soil; it develops under the action of the sunshine and the rain; it becomes at last a full-formed tree. Such are the ways of Providence. Mosaism sprang from the Patriarchal dispensation, Prophetism from Mosaism. The New Testament, in its turn, emerged from the Old. Why should it not be the same with the institutions and the dogmas of Catholicism? Christ did not create the Roman Church as it appeared afterwards to the eyes of the peoples; He simply cast a germ into the soil; but that germ developed, unseen but mightily, until out of the sacred seed has come what God put into it.

This, sir, is the most recent Catholic theory; this is Romanism *à la mode*. To

many men this will seem the most extraordinary of the numerous transformations of the Church. As for me, I cannot tell you how pleased I was with this explanation when first I met with it. Nothing ever seemed to me so natural, so simple, so irresistible. All difficulties seemed to vanish as if by magic. Still, I reflected that, in a matter so grave, it was my duty to look at it again before allowing myself to be entirely satisfied. Alas! a profounder examination has revived all my doubts. I should like you to judge of the considerations which weighed with me.

You know the adage: "Comparisons are not reasons." Now, at bottom, the theory of development is simply a comparison. Christianity is compared to a plant, of which the Gospel is the germ and the Catholic Church the full development. But is the comparison exact? Is the resemblance true? I cannot think so. Facts of the moral order are not accomplished with the regularity and the necessity which the laws of Nature

impose on physical phenomena. When I plant a tree, I know beforehand what will come out of the seed I put into the soil. Its form, its foliage, its fruit, its species, in a word, are determined by predestined laws. It is not so with a religion such as Christianity, with an institution like the Church. An oak cannot become an elm or a lily a rose, but an institution can and often does change in spirit, in tendency, in character. The name remains, but who shall guarantee that under the same name we shall always have the same thing? There has been development, but who shall prove to us that this development has been legitimate? Catholicism was the product of Christianity: a product I grant; but a different product, a degeneration, a corruption.

The theory of development supposes that the Gospel contained Catholicism in a state of germ, or, what comes to the same thing, it affirms that Catholicism was simply an expansion, a blossoming of primitive Christianity. For my part, I am often tempted to

employ a different image. Catholicism is less an authentic product of Christianity than a parasitic plant attached to it. It has grown with it, it has fed on its substance, it has confounded its roots with its own, but it has never been one with it. The oak differs, it is true, from the acorn, but at least there is an intimate affinity between the two. The tree in germ and the tree full grown cannot be of opposite nature. Now the Roman Church and the Gospel of Jesus Christ do not stand to each other in the relation of beginning and development; on many points they are two different religions. I have already told you what my impression is on this matter; on the one side I see a religion entirely personal, on the other a religion in which the priest takes the place of the faithful; on the one side worship in spirit and in truth, on the other worship that is external and mechanical; on the one side speech, on the other sacrament; here a doctrine which in all respects is found to be in harmony with the human soul, there a system of abstract

dogmas, magical rites, and arbitrary institutions. What relation is there between these things? How could the contrary spring from its contrary?

I do not contest the inner logic of Catholicism, any more than the regularity of its developments. I do not know any religious system which bears more distinctly in itself the character of an organic formation. Granted the principle, and everything follows in the most natural way. But that principle is not Christianity, it is Judaism. Catholicism is the child of that dispensation which the New Testament came to abrogate by fulfilling; it has its roots in that external and legal cult which the Lord condemned; and if it can boast of its antiquity, it is that it was already present and active in the tendencies on which the greatest of the Apostles waged such constant war, and which in spite of him sought ceaselessly to substitute the law for grace, the flesh for the spirit.

I do not wish to exaggerate. Catholicism, like Judaism, is at once in opposition to

Christianity and in affinity with it. If it is contrary to evangelical spiritualism, it still employs its symbols. This, then, is what we must think of it. Catholicism is a Judaism, but a Christian Judaism. It is an imperfect and elementary conception of Christian truth. You regard the Gospel as the germ out of which sprang the Church, the Church as the full development of the Gospel. The opposite is true. Catholicism offers but the rudiments of a truly Christian Church. It is but a rough sketch of the work which Jesus Christ confided to the ages. It seems as if the teaching of the Saviour were too high and too simple, too *naïf* and too sublime to be grasped all at once. Nothing strikes one more in the study of history than the inability of men to comprehend those marvellous discourses. The farther you go back and the more you are astonished to see how the evangel was obscured by the imaginations and the subtleties of the doctors. The exegesis of the Fathers would be one of the most ludicrous if it were not one of the

saddest things in the world. The full conception as well as the perfect realisation of the Gospel is not behind but before us. It is the end towards which we are constantly advancing. What is certain is that each step that brings us nearer to it is a step that we take outside Catholicism and away from it.

Catholicism—I mean that of the first centuries—by the very fact that it was Christian, bore in itself the elements of a transformation. As the Old Testament carried the New in its loins, so Catholicism carried in itself the Reformation. The Churches of the Reformation, in their turn, are perhaps not far from the day when they will give place to a Christianity purer than their own. But Catholicism, in regenerating itself, in rejuvenating itself, left behind it a lifeless shell which still bears its image and its name. Its eternal essence emerged from it, it entered into new combinations, and the Roman Church to-day is but a useless residuum, a *caput mortuum* in the crucible that consumes and transforms all things.

ELEVENTH LETTER

THE FUTURE OF CATHOLICISM

M. LE CURÉ — This study would not be complete did I not add a few words as to the future of Catholicism. The future of Catholicism! A grave question, which contains another—the future of humanity.

The answer of Catholics is ready. Their religion, being God's truth, will last to the end of the world. Rome is immutable, and mankind must remain where it is. Societies have thrown off the tutelage of the priesthood, but they will be obliged sooner or later to confess their error and to seek their salvation anew by a total submission to the authority of the Church.

On the other hand, there are not wanting men who foresee the ruin of Catholicism in a

not distant future. They base their opinion on what they call manifest and increasing signs of decadence. Appearances, it must be admitted, are on the side of these prophets of evil.

They recall the Reformation. To believe them, that event struck a blow at Catholicism from which it has not and never will recover. It carried away from it the half of Europe. It has given to heresy a permanent existence, and to the world the spectacle of a society, a civilisation, and a religion independent of the Roman Church. Princes, peoples, have dared to throw off the yoke, and the thunderbolt has not fallen on their heads, nor has the earth opened to swallow them up. On the contrary, they have prospered fairly well.

Nor do they stop here. According to the partisans of this opinion, Catholicism has not only lost all the peoples that the Reformation seduced; with them it has lost the sovereignty of the world. The sceptre of civilisation passed from the Catholic to the Protestant nations. The centre of gravity

of Europe was displaced, and to-day it is found in the societies separate from Rome. It seems as if national and moral degradation were in proportion to the place that the Roman Church still holds in the countries which recognise its law; so much so that that law might pass for a condition of impotence and decadence. Spain, Italy, Mexico, are perishing, bound to the corpse of their religion, and if France still keeps her place in the world, this is less because she is Catholic than because she is so little Catholic.

This reflection may lead the way to another. Catholicism has not only led to the decadence of the peoples I have named; it has at the same time led them to incredulity. They are Catholic in name, in profession, but, great God! what children of the Church! Where has religion less power than in the midst of them? Where may it reckon on more enemies? What weight has a wish of the Pope with the most Catholic of governments? Why does the sovereign

pontiff no longer launch his thunderbolts? Why has he become so chary of issuing interdicts? It is apparently because opinion—that is to say faith—no longer supports them. Alas! so far from having enough credit to excommunicate rebels, the Bishop of Rome has not enough to command the allegiance of his own subjects.

The independence of States in respect to the Pope, and, as they say, the separation of the temporal and the spiritual, has become the most salient feature in the political character of Europe. The kings still honour the sovereign pontiff; they have ambassadors near him; they solicit cardinal's hats for their bishops; at need they send soldiers to support him; but at bottom there is no prince whom they so completely leave out of their councils. King Otho has more importance, the Grand Turk more influence.

. . . . .

But there is something still more fatal to the papacy—the progress of the human mind. This word has often been abused; neverthe-

less it expresses a fact. The value of intellectual progress is often exaggerated; it by no means supposes an equal advance in the moral life, which is the true life of the peoples. It is none the less certain that the general level of intelligence is gradually rising. The results of science are being popularised. Information, which had long been the exclusive possession of a few savants, tends more and more to be diffused among the public. And it is not merely that the mass of knowledge is being augmented, the intellectual instrument is being sharpened, thought is gaining in experience, the critical spirit is being developed by exercise. Now, it is the fact that Catholicism, born in ages when men hardly examined at all, bears ill the examination to which it is subjected to-day. Here the interpretation of the sacred books overturns the sense given to such and such a passage; there criticism lays bare the fraudulent character of such and such a document; the natural sciences modify the whole of our cosmological data; history shows the

Church to be subject, like everything else, to imperfection and error. It seems as if modern thought were bursting Catholicism on all sides at once like a garment that hampers its movements. Roman pretensions are all being exposed. The very defenders of the papacy are capitulating; they make concessions tacit and forced but significant; they have already abandoned the donation of Constantine, the false decretals, the theocratic right of the Popes. They no longer venture to allege the two swords of St. Peter to establish the power of the bishops of Rome; the time will come when they will no longer venture to cite "Thou art Peter" in favour of the primacy, "This is my body" in favour of transubstantiation. Popular good sense suffices in our days to solve questions that formerly needed the learning of doctors to render doubtful. You plead still, you argue, you refine to what end? No one now listens to you.

Such, M. le Curé, are the arguments by means of which many imagine that they are

able to prove that Catholicism is approaching its end. You know the brutal saying of one of these prophets: "Take off your hat to it when it approaches; it still has fifty years to live."

For my part I cannot share this view.

What is Catholicism? If the researches I have submitted to you are not erroneous, Catholicism is an institution of religious tutelage, appropriate to the spiritual incompetence of the masses, an institution which, though not Christianity, may be regarded as a preparation for Christianity. Catholicism is a consistent and complete system of religious authority. Its strength lies in the need which most men feel of renouncing all spiritual individuality, all personal piety, in order to allow themselves to be taught, directed, and sanctified by the priest.

The question of the duration of Catholicism, therefore, is reduced to seeking not what is the value of Catholicism, but what is the permanence of the needs that it satisfies. Thus stated, the question is quickly answered.

Yes, the pretensions of Catholicism to absolute truth vanish in presence of history, as snow in presence of the sun. Yes, the critical development of intelligences ruins the proofs and the arguments of Catholicism, as the change of public right ruins its political constitution. Yes, Catholicism, in its secular form, in its consecrated form, in its Roman form, is no doubt menaced. I say more; decadence has set in, and total ruin only now depends perhaps upon a final blow. Moreover, it would be impossible to dissimulate the importance of this revolution. The least change should be fatal to a church which calls itself immutable. And yet they are under a singular illusion who believe that Catholicism may definitively succumb to the efforts of criticism, the revolutions of society, or even the progress of humanity. Man will always remain man. The thinker will always be rare; the spiritual and independent Christian, by the very fact that he is spiritual, will always be rarer still. There will always be the ignorant, the feeble, who will crave a

Christianity adapted to their state, the indifferent, especially, who are gained beforehand by the religion that troubles them the least. From this point of view Catholicism is immortal. Let it disappear under one form, it will reappear under another. What do I say? If *per impossibile*, it ceased to constitute a distinct community, if its very name disappeared from the face of the earth, it would not on that account be annihilated; it would be reborn, by a sort of metempsychosis, in the churches, in the minds which believe themselves to be most free from it. Catholicism is at once perishable, like everything that is of man; eternal, like everything that is of humanity.

In ending these letters, I feel anew the need, M. le Curé, of apologising to you. I fear I may have seemed to you at times too confident in my way of looking at things, too trenchant in my assertions. Perhaps it may have seemed sometimes as if my language were that of an adversary of Catholicism, rather than that of a man in search of truth.

Often, in fact, I have caught myself indulging in indignation. This is because my expectations have so often been deceived. I have wished to support my weakness on the Church, and, to use a Scriptural expression, I have found myself leaning on a broken reed that has pierced my hand. However, you now know my difficulties, and I still hope that you will help to dissipate them. It is not too late to reclaim me. I feel myself to be more enlightened than when I began my researches; I do not feel more prejudiced or more hostile. You may have had disciples less importunate, I venture to say you have never had any less obstinate. I am one of those who love to be convinced of their errors; grind my arguments to powder, and I will come and shake hands with you as a friend and benefactor.

A CONVERSATION

I HAVE met my curé. This was a few days after my last letter. A common friend was anxious to bring us together at his house. It will easily be believed that the conversation soon turned into a discussion. I was charmed to find in my interlocutor an amiable, serious, educated man, disposed to forget the authority of the priest, and to rely alone on the weapons of reasoning. It would take too long to report the whole of our conversation; I will quote but a fragment. If the reader finds in it some considerations already advanced, he will see at the same time that this dialogue forms a sort of résumé and complement of the letters he has read. It seems to me also to go nearer to the foundation of things. Oral discussion has this advantage — that it forces you to press

ideas more closely, and that it rapidly pushes the parties towards those questions of principle which form the dividing lines of opinions.

Our controversy threatened to be prolonged. I wished to abridge it.

"Let us end," said I, "where we ought to have begun. Give me a definition. What is Catholicism?"

"Catholicism," replied he, with a little embarrassment, "is at once the religion revealed and the Church founded by Jesus Christ: Catholicism is Christianity."

"Indeed!" I said. "But do you not perceive that your brief definition has one fatal fault? It takes for granted the very point in question. It expresses the idea that Catholics have of Catholicism—that is all. Would it not be possible to find some formula less partial? Might we not say, *e.g.*, that Catholicism is *one* of the forms in which Christianity has realised itself on earth, one of the great systems into which Christians are divided? In this way we should have

regard to all the rival pretensions, and we should not need to decide between Rome, Geneva, and the Holy Synod.

"What!" said he. "Do you not see that under pretence of being impartial you are becoming sceptical? In taking your stand outside the Churches, you place them all on the same level, as if they could all of them be true. You would arrive at an objective definition, as they say, and yet, at bottom, you simply substitute your subjectivity for mine, the definition of a neutral for the definition of a believer. But now let me ask *you* a question. Do you believe in the existence of truth on earth?"

"I do not quite understand. Do you mean that truth is a person or a thing occupying a particular space?"

"You are right. The expression I used was at once too abstract and too metaphorical. Tell me, then, whether you believe in the distinction between the true and the false."

"Certainly."

"And the true is better than the false?

Is not the true the good, the life of the soul, while the false is its death?"

"No doubt."

"And this good of the soul, has God done nothing to procure it for men?"

"Go on. I do not wish to contradict you."

"One step more, then. Tell me this, is Christianity true or false?"

"Which Christianity? You know very well that there are several of them."

"Yours if you like," said he with warmth. "Pray let us lay aside for a moment this kind of objection. I repeat my question. Whether do you believe that Christianity is true or false?"

"I believe it to be true."

"And do you believe that Christianity saves men because it is true, or that it might be equally divine, equally holy, equally powerful over souls if it were false?"

"Certainly not. I hold that the good and the true are one."

"Is it not probable that God, who gave

Christianity to men, desired that they should be acquainted with it?"

"Certainly."

"And not only that they should have a knowledge of it, but a knowledge free from error, since otherwise Christianity would have ceased to be the truth—that is to say, the Christianity and the salvation of the world."

"I understand you," I replied. "You believe that Christianity is not only the truth in itself, in the thought and in the words of Christ, for example, but that it is equally true in its earthly manifestation. God, according to you, has so arranged that the Christian truth should be maintained free from all error; that all men should have an accurate knowledge of it. In a word, you believe in absolute truth on earth, at least in the religious order, and you believe that the absolute truth is Catholicism."

"Precisely."

"Very well. I am glad that the discussion has at last brought us to the heart of the matter. I have long regarded the pretension

to absoluteness as the very basis of Catholicism. But do not let us play with words. Let us try to get at the things behind the names they bear. Allow me, then, to ask you what you mean by absolute truth."

"I mean perfect truth, without any admixture of error," said he.

"Wonderful! But truth itself, how do you define it? We are agreed, I believe, that it is neither a person, nor a substance, nor any entity whatsoever. What, then, is it?"

"It is defined, I believe, as the conformity of a notion with the object of that notion."

"It could not be better defined," I replied. "Truth, then, is not in the object itself, but in the notion that I form of it. A body is that which it is, an event occurred as it occurred; the knowledge that I have of it makes no difference; but that knowledge may be exact or inexact. In a word, that which is true or false is my notion of facts, it is my conception of things."

"I grant it," said he.

"Consequently," continued I, "when you speak of absolute truth, you mean an idea absolutely conformed to the nature of things, and when you say that Catholicism is absolute truth, you mean that Catholicism is an adequate conception of Christianity, a religion entirely conformed to the teaching and the institution of Christ."

He nodded in sign of assent, and I continued: "Once more let us beware of playing with words. Nothing is so misleading as abstract terms. We speak of a conception of Christianity, but this conception supposes a subject. I will explain myself. The Catholic notion of Christianity must be formed in human minds. Where is it formed? Where is it to be found? Who is the bearer or the depository of it?"

"The Church."

"Again an abstract term! What is the Church? Do you mean the teaching Church?"

"Certainly."

"What? Do you attribute infallibility to

all the clergy? Is every priest free from error?"

"No, but the representative Church, the Pope and the Councils."

"Very well. I will not press you on this point. I will place the infallibility where you will, in Councils presided over by the Pope, in Councils alone, in the Pope alone, it is all the same to me. Place it in the Pope. The absolute truth of which Catholicism boasts will then consist in this—that the Pope has a knowledge of Christianity exempt from all error."

"Add that this conception of Christianity, as you call it, is in part at least already fixed in the works of the Fathers, and formulated in the decretals of the Church."

"This does not follow. But why, I pray, does the Catholic Church attach so much importance to the possession of absolute truth and to the infallibility which guarantees to it that possession?"

"You ask that!" exclaimed he with some warmth. "Because it is only the truth

that saves, because truth is life, as you yourself have admitted. Nothing is less arbitrary, at bottom, than the necessity of orthodoxy to salvation."

I expected this answer. Now see my embarrassment. God is substantial truth. Jesus Christ conceived God, if I may so speak, in an infallible manner. The Pope, in his turn, conceives the conception of Christ in a manner equally infallible. But the conception of that conception? The interpretation of that interpretation? Are they infallible also? The teaching Church has not received the deposit of absolute truth for itself alone, but to share it with the faithful. Are they also infallible? If they are not, must not the absolute truth become relative, that is to say imperfect and mixed with error in passing into their minds? Can it then save them? And if it does save them notwithstanding the relative character it has assumed, why may it not save the heretic as well, the Protestant, for example, whose errors are no doubt mixed with some truth.

"I do not see why infallibility is necessary for the Pope if it is not to the bishops, to the priests, and to the simple faithful; and if the faithful can dispense with it to receive the teaching of the doctors, I do not see why the doctors may not have done without it in comprehending the teaching of Christ."

My interlocutor did not reply at once. He looked as if he suspected some weak point in my reasoning. I began again after a time.

"You cannot get away from that. Either infallibility is necessary everywhere or it is necessary nowhere. The Apostles were infallible in interpreting the teaching of Christ, the Fathers of the Church in interpreting the teaching of the Apostles, the Councils in determining the meaning of the Fathers; but you have gained nothing if the bishop was not infallible in explaining the Councils to my curé, if my curé was not infallible in transmitting the bishop's explanations to me, and if I was not infallible in understanding the words of my curé. I defy you to show that the truth runs less risk

of deteriorating at one stage of this transmission than at another. Of two things one: either you go too far, or you do not go far enough. You pretend to absolute truth, and it turns out that even if you had it it would not serve your purpose. What is the good of beginning with the absolute and then falling again into the relative?"

We walked some time in silence. By and by I continued:—

"The hypothesis of absolute truth is easy to verify. The existence of the unconditioned, as the philosophers say, in a world where everything else is relative, limited, conditional, ought to be recognised at a glance. It is a miracle, a permanent miracle, a miracle which cannot fail to stand out clearly from the tissue of purely natural facts of which the history of men is composed. We have tested the Catholic hypothesis by examining how it solves the problem that it was invented to solve. I would continue the test by pushing this hypothesis to its near and legitimate consequences. For a long time the term

absolute has seemed to me synonymous with self-evident truth; I mean that one of these attributes implies the other, that the second is the inseparable correlative of the first. What do you think?"

"What do you mean?" said he. "What is it that is self-evident? The truth of Catholic doctrine, or this particular truth that the Catholic Church is infallible and its teaching absolutely true?"

"Both," I replied. "The two things are the same. You do not deny that Catholic doctrine is summed up in the dogma of infallibility—that is to say in the absolute character of its teaching. Tell me, then, what to think about it: does it seem to you that the possession of the truth by the Catholic Church is self-evident?"

"Explain yourself."

"I say that, if this privilege is not self-evident it ought to be, and that this self-evidence is a necessary corollary, a consequence, unperceived perhaps, but inevitable, a logical element in the Catholic

system. You believe that the Catholic Church is the depository of absolute truth: how do you know? Tell me."

"By the Church itself, or, if you will, by Jesus Christ and the Apostles who founded the Church."

"Impossible! We are in the midst of a vicious circle. The testimony of Jesus Christ, of the Apostles, of the Church, forms part of that truth whose character we are in search of, the reality, the meaning, the value of that testimony depend on the value of the teaching of the Church—that is to say, on the value of that very thing that is in question.

"How is it possible to avoid begging the question in such a case? We ought to do so in every case, and we can only do so on one condition; it is that the starting-point shall be self-evidence. We are now come to the thesis I wish to establish. Catholicism is nothing if it is not self-evident. It must rest on an axiom, and that axiom can only be itself, its pretensions or its rights,

its absolute character. But here I touch another consideration. Let us lay Catholicism aside for a moment. Do you know any other absolute truth in the world?"

"Certainly; axioms, *e.g.* in mathematics, and duty in ethics."

"And how do you know that these truths are absolute, except by the possibility at each moment of comparing the notion with the object, the definition of a straight line with the straight line itself, the act commanded by conscience with the feeling of moral obligation? And how is this comparison effected if not by an intuition more or less direct?

. . . per se noto,
A guisa del ver primo che l' uom crede.]

Now the possibility of an intuition of this kind is precisely what we call self-evidence. If, therefore, Catholicism is absolute truth, it can only be recognised as such intuitively and by way of self-evidence; it must be self-evident."

"Very well," said he, "I will not con-

tradict you. I am ready to admit that Catholicism is self-evident."

"One moment," I said. "The thesis deserves to be established before it is admitted. How do you say that man is saved?"

"By faith."

"Yes, but by what faith?"

"By the orthodox faith."

"That is to say, by believing what the Church teaches, at all events, by being prepared to believe it—that is to say, by believing in the Church itself, in its infallibility, in its being the depository of absolute truth. Faith in the Church is therefore obligatory?"

"Certainly."

"Obligatory for all, for priest and layman, the learned and the ignorant, the missionary and the savage?"

"Of course."

"Let us now see whether Catholicism can do without being self-evident. It is necessary to believe in it, to believe in it as absolute

truth, to believe in it under penalty of damnation; it is necessary for the most ignorant as well as for the most enlightened to believe in it; how could this be, if the object proposed to our faith were not self-evident? Artisans and peasants, negroes and savages cannot prosecute the studies necessary to appreciate the proofs brought forward by your savants and preachers; they must have something more universally accessible. Or perhaps you would say they believe without reason to believe?"

"By no means. Besides, I repeat, I do not see why I should have any reserve in accepting your conclusions."

"Very well. But I have not yet finished. I mean to establish incontrovertibly that Catholicism pretends to self-evidence and could not do without it. You know that it is not naturally tolerant. The employment of constraint in the conversion of heretics or unbelievers is a constant tradition of your Church. Augustine invoked this means, the popes and the Catholic kings have largely

used it, the most zealous and the most approved of your organs in the Press connive at it, and the fact is, that Catholic official authority has never condemned it. That is a satisfaction that it will not accord to the modern spirit. In this I believe it is guided by a true instinct. It perceives that absolute truth must be self-evident truth, and that the self-evidence of a religion renders persecution as natural, as necessary, as it would otherwise be odious and absurd. I need not develop this proposition. If the truth of Catholicism shines with a light sufficient to convince all minds, it is clear that everybody will embrace it who is not either wicked, or stupid, or both. Hence I do not see why it would not be legitimate, or rather useful and convenient, to force the wicked to amend his ways, and to chastise him if he obstinately refuses."

"Bravo!" he exclaimed. "No one has ever better pleaded the cause of intolerance."

"It is the cause of logic that I plead. But let us come back to the facts. Do you

grant me what I ask? Do you admit that an absolute truth can only be a self-evident truth, and that the two terms, if not identical, are at least correlative?"

"Yes, I think I may grant you that."

"You grant me that!" I exclaimed. "Catholicism self-evident! Do you mean it for a pleasantry or a paradox? In what is it self-evident? On what point? Tradition, which lies scattered and hidden in the Fathers and the Councils — is that self-evident? Authority, of which no one has ever been able to decide what is the seat? Infallibility, which remains without relation to the intelligence, the character, the sanctity of those who are its organs, so much so that a scoundrel may become the mouthpiece of the Holy Ghost? The sacraments, external and material rites to wash away men's sins and regenerate their souls—are they self-evident? Transubstantiation, an anonymous miracle which only exists to faith, a supernatural fact hidden beneath natural appearances—is that self-evident? It is necessary

that Catholicism should be self-evident; I see that clearly enough: it is nothing if it is not that. At the same time it is not, it cannot be, it never will be. This is an inner contradiction. It is this which preys upon the vitals of your religion."

"I do not see there any contradiction," he replied. "I do not even see how there could be any contradiction in it. The pretension to self-evidence, even if it lacked foundation, would always be an excellent exception. It is all very well for you to raise objections against religion. I tell you that this religion bears in my eyes the self-evident character. What do you say in reply to me? If self-evidence does not prove itself, neither does it discuss itself or refute itself. I see, I tell you that I see; you do not pretend, I think, to prove to me that I do not see."

"Give me your attention, then. You are forgetting your rôle. You are wielding a weapon that will cut your hands. Have you not just said 'I' and 'me'? Have you not declared that religion is self-evident to

your eyes? You thus entrench yourself in your inner sense, in your personal conviction. But it is self-evidence that it is necessary to invoke, not your own sense, self-evidence, which, for that matter, does not need to be invoked, because it is the same for all, evidence which no one thinks of contesting or proving, precisely because it is self-evidence, because all see it. We do not dispute about daylight, because everybody shares in it equally."

"Except the blind."

"Never mind the blind. I will return to them presently. I say, then, that the characteristic of self-evidence is universality, and that Catholicism is not universal. Before the sixteenth century one might have been under an illusion on this subject; since half Europe broke away from the Roman Church there has been no room for any such illusion. Catholicism is now only a branch of Protestantism."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said I, "that it is simply one

opinion among others, one sect among others. It curses individualism, subjectivism, but it cannot escape from them itself. You enunciate your dogmas, you maintain the infallibility of your Church, the absolute truth of its teaching, the self-evidence of its pretensions—what does this mean? That such is your opinion, that is all. It does not alter matters much that this opinion is shared by many others; that is a mere question of numbers. Majorities do not affect the truth.

"Do you not see," I continued, "that a thing either is self-evident or it is not. You demand that all shall acknowledge Catholic truth to be self-evident. That is a bad sign in itself; it is a proof that all do not perceive it. Now what sort of self-evident truth is that which all do not perceive? Some may differ from you; that is evident, because they do differ. They would not be able to differ from you if your absolute truth were manifest truth. You say that Catholicism is true; another will say the same of his religion or irreligion; you say it is evident, but if

evidence becomes a matter of opinion, another will appeal to evidence. You will have your work cut out. You will always find yourself confronted by an opinion different from yours, that will appeal to the same rights and to the same pretensions, and you will never be able to settle the matter to the general satisfaction. To all your arguments I might reply that they do not convince me, that I think differently, that thought is free. What would you? God has so made the world; He has not permitted that religious truth should be like a lamp hung in the lobby that every one sees on entering. Your attempts to bring the truth out of that relative condition in which God has placed it, your efforts to constitute the absolute on this earth, mistake the very conditions of the problem, I might say the conditions of humanity. You are like a man trying to stand on his own shoulders, or looking out of the window to see himself pass in the street. Excuse me if I find this rather childish."

"And I," retorted he with some warmth,

"cannot refrain from saying that you are plunging into the depths of scepticism. To believe you, there would be no such thing as truth and falsehood."

"You are mistaken. There is such a thing as relative truth—that is to say, what each one holds to be true. I do not say you should cease to hold Catholicism to be true, self-evidently true if you will; it is in the nature of things that we should hold to be self-evident that which we hold to be true; we cannot at the same time regard a proposition as true and doubtful, as certain and uncertain. All I ask is that you should react against your impression. It is necessary to test the personal and inward by means of the external and historical fact. You hold a thesis to be self-evident—that is to say, it appears to you to be such; but others are not of your opinion; hence this thesis is not self-evident, since self-evidence excludes difference of opinions, and you ought to restrict yourself to saying that the thesis in question is self-evident to you, or rather

that you regard it as true, that you believe in it."

"In no wise!" he exclaimed. "The human race does not say, 'This seems true,' it says, 'This is true.' And why? Because it believes in the unity of human intelligence; it does not admit that what is true for one may not be true for another, for all. I repeat it, you are plunging into scepticism. It is always the fate of those who abandon Catholic truth."

"You forget," I rejoined, "that the same man who identifies his opinion with absolute truth one day will perhaps recognise the next that he has been mistaken, and confidently adopt a new opinion which, on being better informed, he will be forced to abandon in its turn. You are shutting yourself up to the observation of a psychological phenomenon —that is to say, to a personal and subjective fact, whereas the question before us is capable of an historical solution. Nay, more. At bottom it is a question of words. The question is, what is self-evidence? Well, I have already

said self-evidence is not something that one or many hold for certain, but that which brings certainty to all, that which produces it whether we will or no, that which imposes it.

"After this," I continued, "I am not careful to deny a certain objectivity to truth. There is something in the world besides individual opinions; there is a fusion of these opinions brought about by the conflict of men's minds; there is a general truth which separates itself from particular affirmations and negations; there is, as it were, an objective power of the true which hovers above them, modifies them, tempers them, and harmonises them. It is in this way that humanity solves successively this question and that, never to return to them, after which it turns to other questions, and advances always, leaving the roadway strewn with débris. This débris is composed of doctrines it has tested and rejected, of ideas especially, of which, after it has extracted the substance, it drops the first expression, the primitive and childish form. It has been said, and, in this

sense, rightly, that truth does not exist but is made. It remains to be seen whether Catholicism is one of these definitive conquests that humanity has accomplished, whether it has become one of the axioms of its intellectual and moral life, or whether it is not rather the antiquated envelope of some substantial truth, a form of which the human race will more and more feel the insufficiency."

"I love to believe," he replied, "that moral truths are among those to which you accord an objective force, and the self-evidence that results from it. Well, I claim nothing more for Catholicism. Catholicism is evident with a moral evidence; it is potent with a religious power. It also goes without saying that it demands corresponding dispositions. The Gospel addresses itself to humble and penitent hearts. There is no demonstration of the faith for him who is afraid of the demands of the faith. The light shines for all, but there are men that love darkness rather than light."

"See how you are lowering your preten-

sions," I rejoined. "You began by maintaining that Catholicism was self-evident. This assertion led to the declaration that every dissentient was either smitten with insanity or guilty of hardness of heart. Now you give up intellectual self-evidence; it is clear that all unbelievers are not in the asylum. But you only give this up in order to entrench yourself in a pretended moral self-evidence. Is your position improved? May not all Churches and all opinions appeal to the same fact? Do they not actually do so? Can it be a question of self-evidence when everybody claims that his own cause is self-evident? But that is not all. I dispute the truth of your assertion; and on this matter I appeal from your apologetic to your conscience, from your moral theory to your moral sense. You speak of inward dispositions that are necessary in order to believe; do those dispositions necessarily lead to Catholicism? Is there no repentance, no humility, no charity, no devotion outside your Church? Are there no heretical saints? Have you never felt

the spirit of Christ in any other communion than your own? Is it not the evil—I was going to say the curse—of your system not to be able to see piety in a dissentient, to be obliged to deny it, under penalty of denying itself? If I were you I would never raise the question on which you just touched. There is none more dangerous to Catholicism. It is the side on which its theory breaks itself against facts. It is there that it becomes either inconsistent or odious."

"Your arguments are specious," he replied. "I might perhaps be embarrassed to reply to them, and yet, shall I avow it? Your dialectic does not shake me much. It is so easy to criticise. You have done your best to prove that Catholicism is false. It has nevertheless been for centuries the life of a world; and even now what does it need in order to save society but to be believed by that society?"

"The mischief is that society can no longer believe in it. You distrust dialectics, you say; as if I had done anything through this discussion but show the discord between

the Catholic theory and reality and experience. There was a time when that theory corresponded with facts. Catholicism was really Catholic, for it embraced, if not the world, at least Europe; its doctrines might pass for self-evident since they were generally admitted; the truths it taught, as absolute, for no one dreamed of any other. But the facts which once sustained it have now abandoned it. There is contradiction between it and the reality, between its dogmas and the needs, the tendencies, the ideas of our times. It has become obsolete, impossible."

And would to God that this was the only reproach to which it is open. Catholicism (I am not the man to question it), Catholicism has been one of the great things of this world. It watched over the cradle of our modern society; it taught it the name of God and Jesus Christ; it inculcated on it faith in the spirit and in immortality; in ages of rudeness and licence it stood alone for justice and for charity; we owe to it all that we are. It

is not we who have left it; it is it that has abandoned us, alas! It was not able to retain its youthfulness; with strength it lost sincerity, with sincerity, sap and life. To those who are able to rise above sectarian passions and regard things in the light of eternal truth, there is, you may be sure, no sadder spectacle than modern Catholicism with its impotence, its passions, its puerile paradoxes, the bad faith of its polemics, the bitterness of its party spirit, its want of political morality, with its fanatical and ignorant clergy, with its journals devoted to the blackening of all things, with a pope occupied in decreeing the immaculate conception! It bears on its brow all the marks of decadence. In our epoch of great ruins, it is the strangest and the most complete.

THE END